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FATHERHOOD FROM THEIR VOICES: DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF BLACK NON-RESIDENTIAL FATHERHOOD

by

AMBERLY THOMPSON

Under the Direction of Makungu Akinyela

ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of Black fathers who have children but do not reside with them. The study focused in particular on fathers who have formal agreements to pay child support through the Georgia Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Services. The study sought to gain insight into how Black fathers within these circumstances negotiate parenting with their children and how they understand the meaning of fatherhood. Using the qualitative, narrative methodological approach, data for the study was collected through personal interviews. Data was analyzed and synthesized thematically. 12 participants were recruited from the metro Atlanta area through, convenience samples, snowball methods, flyers and posts within the “Black Fathers” social group on Facebook.

INDEX WORDS: Black fathers, African American fathers, Child support, Non-residential fathers

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NON-RESIDENTIAL FATHERHOOD

by

AMBERLY THOMPSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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NON-RESIDENTIAL FATHERHOOD

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August 2014

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother. Thank you mom for always supporting and believing in me in my educational endeavors. It is your support that has encouraged me to stay the course.

For Black fathers, your work is valuable and is not in vain.

Azibo, this is for you. May you get the desires of your heart while continuing to be the magnificently great father that you are. You deserve all the best. I love you.

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Dr. Makungu Akinyela, thank you for the guidance and the belief in my abilities. You have helped me in more ways than one and you may never know the full impact you have truly made upon my life during these past two years.

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PROLOGUE

Father/child relationships have been an interest of mine for quite sometime. I think that there are so many external as well as internal components that help to shape what it means to be a father; in particular a Black father. I also think, too often the factors that help all of us to shape ideas about Black fatherhood are overlooked or dismissed.

I became particularly interested in live away fathers Father's Day 2010. I was visiting my paternal grandfather in Bassfield, MS and attended church with him, my parents and my sister. During the announcements portion of the service, the pastor asked for the eldest father in the congregation to stand and be recognized; my grandfather stood to receive resounding applause. The pastor then asked for the youngest father in the congregation to stand; my cousin's husband stood and received the same applause. Finally, the pastor asked that all fathers in the congregation stand to receive gifts that had been prepared specially for them on their day. Much to my surprise, many women stood up claiming to be both mother and father. This caused a great stir in the church, mostly laughter and affirmations of the dual role that some mothers play. While I understand the reality of single motherhood, I could not help but to feel a bit of anguish in this moment. On a day that is supposed to recognize the role, work and beauty of fatherhood, in just a moment, some women had taken the attention away from such a precious moment. I wondered if men who happened to be raising their kids alone might stand on mother's day.

I became even more interested in the topic of non-residential fathers when I began dating my significant other. As a man who became a father at the age of twenty, there were many decisions that he had to make rather early in his adulthood. With the desire to negate any

negative stereotypes that existed about Black fathers, he wanted to do everything he could for his daughter. He began working three jobs and was instrumental in many parenting duties early on. This was also in conjunction with his desire to have a better father relationship to his daughter than he had with his father, and his father with his grandfather. After the dissolution of the relationship with his daughter's mother, he eventually became entwined within the family court system. First, in order to have any rights to his daughter, in order to make any decisions regarding her, he had to become legitimized as her father, despite his name being on her birth certificate. Second, a formal child support order was put into place in addition to a parenting plan that mapped out how he and his daughter's mother would handle visitation and other parenting responsibilities. This worked for a while with resolving issues that began to come up in their parenting relationship. In addition to the monthly agreed upon amount, he contributed other in kind supplies and necessities to his daughter. After a while however, this document proved to not be enough as his daughter's mother began to disregard the plan and decide when and when not to allow him to see his daughter. Steady child support payments did not mean steady visitation with his daughter.

A couple years later, he was laid off from his job and therefore could no longer afford to pay the agreed upon amount each month. To compensate, he worked odd jobs here and there while unemployed to cover his daughter's expenses. Although the payments were not what they were previously, they were small contributions that he could afford. Furthermore, when there might have been a surplus of income, he contributed more when he could. In addition, he inquired about more parenting time since he was not working and contended that she could stay with him long term and would be better able to care for her at his house because whatever he had already, he could easily provide for his daughter, rather than having to come up with extra funds.

Furthermore, he would be a more cost efficient option to childcare for any times her mother would need it. This request was denied and without employment, he was placed in the child support enforcement system by her mother.

After informing the enforcement system that she had not received any payments for ten months, he began to receive letters threatening license suspension for the amount of money he collected in arrears. The statement however, was untrue; though she did not receive full monthly amounts she received money within those ten months. Around this time he found another job but was faced with a dilemma as he was not supposed to be driving because his license ended up being suspended. In order to be able to travel out of the city to work, he took out a loan to pay the large amount of money at one time, thus adding another expense and thus essentially having to pay child support twice: once to keep up the current payments and again to repay the loan. As a result, he endured major challenges financially and it became harder for him to keep up his own necessities. Now that he is working again, he only pays what the state mandates and no longer gives additional money and other needs for his daughter. In the midst of all of this, his visitation rights are never secure as she decides when he gets his daughter rather than following the court order. Attempts to go to court have proven unfruitful in his favor without legal representation. At this point, he has gotten a lawyer, adding another expense, in order to get stable visitation because he feels he is missing out on valuable quality time during this crucial time in his daughter's life. Arguably time that is equally as important as financial provision.

The turmoil that defines this relationship between my significant other and his daughter's mother is one that I had heard before. Many men have shared the story of wanting to be involved in their children's lives but being unable to because of being the relationship with the child's mother. Often that money is often a factor in determining whether a father sees his child, but if

there are instances where money might not always be available, are there other ways that can be considered support for a man's child? How do fathers who want to be involved with their children, but happen to be non-residential, negotiate fatherhood? How do they parent without being present on a daily basis? What are their circumstances and how do those affect the ways in which they parent?

One day, while watching an interaction between he and his daughter I remarked at how great of a father he was. There are things that exist in their relationship that I often wished for in my relationship with my father. He responded with appreciation and remarked about how society made him feel like he was not a good father, simply because he did not live with his daughter, stay in the relationship with her mother and because sometimes he struggled financially to provide. I began to wonder how many men shared this same sentiment and such begins my exploration.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Taking into consideration popular discourse on African-American fatherhood, it is typical to hear stories of men who are not present in the homes with their children. The conversation often starts from the statistical data that says that 70% of Black children are born into homes that are headed by single women. This high statistic suggests an absence of Black men from parenting altogether. However, there is literature that suggests otherwise (Coles & Green, 2010; Connor & White, 2011). Judging Black fatherhood through a dominant lens suggests that Black fathers are negligent and indeed absent. However, Hamer found in her study that Black fathers are present in more ways than are often known and they are willing to father through other means that are not always recognized by society or the child support enforcement system

(Hamer, 2001). It is important to consider all the ways in which a father may contribute to the rearing of his children, though he may not reside with them as a way to legitimate non-dominant ideas about fathering.

Interestingly, the one perspective that is often missing from these conversations about fatherhood are the voices from the fathers themselves (Hamer, 2001; Julion et. al, 2007; Jordan-Zachery, 2009). The term “deadbeat dad” is a common and often repeated epithet that more often than not conjures up images of Black men. This is not to suggest however that only Black families experience high numbers of absent fathers.

Within the past year, there have been stories that made news of men and their dealings with their children, their children’s mothers, the court systems and child support. These stories are important to look at because they signify the magnitude of the problem that may exist for Black fathers but might often be overlooked. In Durham, North Carolina, police killed a 26-year-old man after a suicidal standoff in the downtown area. Just a day before, the man posted on his Facebook page about his frustrations with the court system during his custody battle with the child’s mother. In another case, a man in Houston faces jail time despite having all of his child support paid up to date. Finally, a man in Georgia who had recently won a custody battle with his children found out that a week later, the mother of the children poisoned and killed the children. (WNCN, 2013; Wallace, 2014; Kandel, Vargas, & Lowrey, 2013). While these few cases are not representative of the breadth of the situations that exist for non-residential families, they fed my interest on the topic of Black fatherhood, of which I am generally interested.

Additionally, there are public media stories that ask questions about the necessity of fathers in today’s day and age, as well as articles that spread the news of studies that prove that Black fathers are present and active in their children’s lives. Various television and radio

programs have also raised the topic for public discussion. This idea of Black fatherhood and what it means appears to be heavily present in everyday conversations.

1.2 Problem Statement

When considering policies that are created and enacted that affect non-residential fathers, much of the data that influences those policies come from perspectives other than those whom the policies affect (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). Fathers, and specifically, non-residential, never married fathers are rarely given the opportunity to share their perspectives and roles as fathers. This study seeks to gain a perspective from Black fathers who are registered within the Division of Child Support Services of the Georgia Department of Human Services in order to find how they understand the meaning of their roles as fathers in the context of this particular system.

1.3 Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study is to understand the meaning of fatherhood as determined from the voices of fathers who are non-residential and pay monthly to the Division of Child Support Services of the Department of Human Services of Georgia. This study is significant because this particular perspective is one that is not often included when discussing fatherhood (Julion et al., 2007). Participants will be asked to what fatherhood means to them and about the sources from which they defined the role for themselves. Furthermore, they will be asked about their experiences within the child support enforcement system of Georgia, and their contributions, financial and otherwise to their children. Finally, the participants will be asked to assess the ways in which race may play a role in their parenting and perceptions about their parenting. This component may pull upon the tenets of critical race theory within the American court system.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This research is significant because it takes into consideration the meaning of black fatherhood from the perspective of black fathers. The research seeks to validate other methods of fathering since these ways may not always be recognized as efforts by external factors or individuals. This research seeks to dispel myths about the absence of black fathers and present ways that fathers are present or try to be present in the lives of their children.

1.5 Nature of the Study

The research design will take the narrative approach and data will be collected through one on one, semi-structured interviews. Narrative research collects stories from individuals about their told and lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Because narrative stories tell of individual experiences, they also shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves (Creswell, 2013, pp. 71). This is important since in discovering a meaning for fatherhood for these participants, their identities as such might be influenced by the factors included in this research.

1.6 Research Questions

This research is guided by the following research questions:

Guiding Question:

What is the meaning of fatherhood for Black, non-residential fathers who participate in the child support enforcement system in Georgia?

Secondary Questions:

1. What is Black fatherhood and what are the sources for its definition?
2. What role does race play in their understandings of fatherhood?

3. What barriers, (child support, communication with mothers, relationships with children, etc.) if any, do they experience in fulfilling their desired role as fathers?

1.7 Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory or Human Ecological Theory will be employed for this study. This particular theory views human development in terms of an ecological system that is divided into 5 subsystems or “layers of environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Development occurs through interaction. The systems are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. The microsystems involves the most immediate and direct impacts to an individual. This system includes family, school, religious institutions, neighborhoods and peers. The mesosystem is characteristic of the relations between microsystems, for instance, a family experience that may be related to a work experience; negative relationships with family may be reflected in work relationships. The exosystem involves the links between a social setting in which the individual does not have an active role and the individual’s immediate context (Hamer, 2001; Bush & Bush, 2013). This is illustrated by an individual’s home experience that may be influenced by another family member’s work experience. The Macrosystem describes the culture in which the individual lives. Examples are socioeconomic status or race. Finally, the chronosystem is the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course as well as sociohistorical circumstances. Examples are changes in relationships, work, or opportunities for women (Bush & Bush, 2013).

This theory applied to this research will function to discover the meaning of fatherhood by looking at Black fathers and their children in the following ways:

Table 1.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Microsystem	Immediate family dynamics, education, religious affiliation, community and peers
Mesosystem	Family dynamics and how that may affect or influence work experiences, relationships with children's mothers, new relationships
Exosystem	Home life that may be affected by home life of their child, Socioeconomic status, job opportunities, job stability
Macrosystem	Black culture and dynamics, law and policy, ideal dominant fatherhood
Chronosystem	Relationship changes; changes in family dynamics, specifically Black family dynamics

1.8 Definitions

Non-residential – fathers who do not share a residence with their child(ren).

Never-Married Families—Families that exist through the conception of a child, however the parents of the child were never contractually married to one another.

1.9 Assumptions and Biases

Identified assumptions include assuming that the fathers that I choose to interview will be open and honest about their experiences because they often do not have the opportunity to do so. My assumptions and biases are composed of my own life experiences and observations and being personally connected to someone who would fit the criteria of this research. I believe that my closeness to the perspective of a father who provides for his child financially through the Georgia Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Services, makes me passionate in hearing the stories of these fathers. My understanding of the single parent household is limited however because I grew up with both parents. These biases and assumptions

however are minimized through journaling, research and using reflexivity throughout the research process.

1.10 Scope, Limitations, Delimitations

Only personal interviews will be conducted to get these understandings of fatherhood from participants. Other methods such as participant observation or document analysis may be helpful in gaining a complete perspective of their lives, however time does not allow for that level of depth. Delimitations on the research are choosing not to engage anyone other than fathers in the research. I have chosen to only interview non-residential fathers, who pay child support into the child support enforcement system because many stories about non-residential fathers do not come directly from them. I have chosen to interview fathers who are registered in the child support enforcement system to get a particular perspective, but I have not chosen to involve the agency.

1.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the background and significance of this study based on background research. An overview and brief summary of methods, nature of the study and research questions for the study were provided. Additionally, the scope, limitations, delimitations and assumptions of the study were presented. In the next chapter, literature that informed this study will be discussed in detail.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning of fatherhood as determined from the voices of fathers who are non-residential and pay into the child support enforcement system. The primary and secondary research questions guiding the study were as follows:

What is the meaning of fatherhood for Black, non-residential fathers who participate in the child support enforcement system in Georgia?

Secondary Questions:

4. What is Black fatherhood and what are the sources for its definition?
5. What role does race play in their understandings of fatherhood?
6. What barriers, (child support, communication with mothers, relationships with children, etc.) if any, do they experience in fulfilling their desired role as fathers?

The literature presented in this chapter is drawn from a variety of disciplines, including Sociology, Philosophy, and History. Databases were used to gather information, such as JSTOR and EBSCO; additionally, books were identified as guides in order to gather information to create an understanding of the context of black fatherhood. The literature is presented in six sections. The first section considers the meaning of fatherhood in general and then specifically for the black community. Second, African centered concepts of fatherhood are explored as means to lend to the current understanding and attempt to define what black fatherhood is exactly. Next, black father absence and the dynamics of low-income, non-custodial fathers is discussed. Media perceptions and historical stereotypes are considered in the next section and finally, research on the black family and fathers is discussed in order to understand what approaches have already been employed and how to conduct further research on this subject.

2.1 Contemporary Fatherhood and the Meaning of Fatherhood

What does it mean to be a father? It is a question that cannot easily be answered, and according to Nease and Austin, it is also a question that throughout the world and history has been largely neglected (2010). Recent discourse exists that affirms the need for fathers and reiterates the importance of engaged fathers on the positive outcomes of their children (Clayton, Mincy & Blankenhorn, 2003), however fatherhood is still a concept that exists on the periphery of parenthood. Stereotypes that have traditionally molded fatherhood have placed them as the provider, protector, and disciplinarian; rarely the nurturer. However these ideas are being challenged in modern society. Many men who are experiencing fatherhood today can be found doing the work that their fathers, and especially grandfathers would not have engaged in just a few years ago (Nease & Austin, 2010). Dominant ideals about contemporary fatherhood see fathers being involved in ways that were typically reserved for mothers. For example, cooking, cleaning, and aiding in the nurturing and guiding of their children are the most salient changes that have occurred to “update” how people think about fathers. Of course, since children are born of two parents, there is much benefit to experiencing more personable relationships like these with fathers. Gender modeling for boys and girls and character building are new dimensions that have defined contemporary fatherhood. My reference to gender modeling refers to the traditional idea that says that fathers need to be present for boys in particular so that they will know how to behave as men. Little research has been done on the significant impact of fathers upon their daughters, but what is now known is that daughters are equally as impacted as boys in the absence or presence of a father (Coles & Green 2010).

While trying to determine, what fatherhood is, another question to consider is, *when does fatherhood begin?* Fink-Jensen provides insight to the transitional period that men experience

when becoming fathers juxtaposed to the transition that mothers experience (Nease & Austin; See Fink-Jensen, 2010). Narrative analysis, according to Fink-Jensen recognizes that the stories we tell are important cultural and social clues to social status and identity (Nease & Austin, 2010). Mothers reinforce their identities as mothers through the stories they tell with other mothers. From stories of experiences that women have during gestation to birth, women are more likely to tell and retell these stories and thus reinforce their roles as mothers. Fathers on the other hand, simply do not engage typically in these types of conversations with their friends.

Furthermore, beyond the physical changes that a woman goes through, there are other external factors that serve as reminders that emphasize the transition to motherhood such as, baby showers, maternity clothes, prenatal appointments and advice about mothering, with birth being the culmination of the transformation (Nease & Austin; See Fink-Jensen, 2010). Since men do not biologically experience pregnancy, the transition period is often neglected and leaves men feeling separated from the entire process. This alienation prevents them from being connected to their new identity as fathers when, according to Fink-Jensen, many expectant fathers want to participate in and experience pregnancy and birth (Nease & Austin; See Fink-Jensen, 2010).

In order to connect with their new identities as fathers, Fink-Jensen suggests learning about pregnancy, birth and parenting by reading and talking to others. More suggestions for fostering this new identity and transitional period include: ensuring physical and emotional health, attending prenatal appointments, developing a connection to the baby while in utero, supporting their partners and helping to make important decisions throughout pregnancy and birth and finally, attending prenatal classes. It is important to consider the transitional periods for men who are young and not married to their children's mothers in order to comprehend what they understand fatherhood to mean.

Black fatherhood specifically exists within the context and in relation to a number of other social factors that help to define the meaning of fatherhood. It is often defined by other people, namely, the mothers of their children, the courts, and research on divorced white men (Julion, et al., 2007).

According to Jennifer Hamer, what Black fathers do for their children is:

“influenced by black men’s ability to define and voice their own vision of fatherhood in the context of their collective economic and social circumstances. For those men who have little else to offer, the provision of nurturance, love, and affection are priceless aspects of fatherhood. Said one father, ‘No matter what anybody else say, we black men have got to make fatherhood work for *us*...All our babies want is their daddies, and we have got to decide what that means” (p. 220).

Societal assumptions are made as far as what fatherhood means in the context of traditional and dominant expectations and definitions of it. In her study, Hamer found that Black fathers and their status gave them the freedom to set their own standards for paternal behavior (Hamer, 2001). A dominant ideal of fatherhood places emphasis on the providing responsibilities of fathers. However, because of factors such as job status, education, and incarceration, black fathers find other ways to be involved in parenting that differ from dominant standards (Hamer, 2001). When asked to discuss their roles and responsibilities to their children, the most important role for them was to be a caregiver, spend time with their children and provide emotional support. Other roles deemed as important included, being disciplinarians, aiding in formation function (serving as role models/teachers/guides), providing economic support, and providing legal endowment, respectively (Hamer, 2001). On the contrary, dominant fatherhood ranks these roles inversely: 1) to provide legal endowment, 2) provide economic support, 3) provide

protection, 4) to be a caregiver and 5) to aid in formation function (Hamer, 2001). Asserting similar roles for African descended fathers, Ahadi suggests that African centered fathering does not in fact have an individual identity rather it is a communitarian role and responsibility (2008). Ahadi's description of this role is that fathers provide guidance, love, quality time, listen to their children and build their self-love and self-esteem. Fathers are also slow to criticize, practice non-violence and share an equal role in housework (Ahadi, 2008).

There is some confusion that surrounds the idea of what black fatherhood is exactly due to unclear definitions (Connor & White, 2008). Furthermore, traditional definitions of fatherhood, wide ranging and contemporary as they may be, do not adequately capture the cultural nuances that help to construct fatherhood in the black community (Connor & White, 2008). Connor & White suggest that in this deficiency, there should be a fluid, more inclusive definition that captures the essence of black fatherhood within the context of black social and family networks (2008). One simple explanation however seems ambitious since there are so many different dynamics that compose to create black fatherhood.

One final perspective that examines fathers trying to determine their roles is a concept that Maldonado introduces as "Disney dads." This concept is applied specifically the fathers who have limited visitation rights and privileges so that when they do see their children, there is more focus put on entertaining their child rather than actually parenting (Maldonado, 2005).

2.2 African and African Centered Fathering and Black Fathering within American Context

Looking at the meaning of African fatherhood reveals quite an interesting perspective. What contemporary fatherhood means for the dominant culture, has essentially existed for years prior to the modern period and remains an African retention of the black family. According to Balogun, traditional Yoruban fatherhood has been one that has always included providing, caring for, nurturing and instructing children according to the social norms of the community (Nease & Austin; see Balogun, 2010). Fathers who believe their roles end at financial provision would be enacting a grave disservice to their children by not taking a holistic approach to engagement with their children (Nease & Austin; see Balogun, 2010). “Iya ni wura, baba ni dingi” a Yoruban proverb meaning, “mother is gold, father is mirror,” illustrates the cooperative nature of two parents in the upbringing of their children. Ahadi further affirms this concept of African parenting by stating that ideas of African manhood synthesize male and female roles and responsibilities (2008). Parenting in an African concept however does not end at the mother and father. Community involvement in rearing children is a very necessary component of rearing children successfully. Family, according to Balogun, is one that is not centered in the European understanding of nuclear dynamics; rather, it is inclusive of extended networks of family that also includes ancestors (Nease & Austin; see Balogun, 2010). Additionally, to be a father does not necessarily correlate to being a husband.

The idea of communal or social fathering is very prevalent within African tradition, as many African descended people form kinship networks with people who are not kin (Ahadi, 2008). If a biological father should neglect his child that does not automatically mean that the child is fatherless. In fact, Morrell and Richter posit that there is no such thing as a fatherless child and that even if the child does not reside with their father or rarely sees their father that

does not erase the fact that there is indeed a biological father (2004). Furthermore, other males in the family such as grandfathers, stepfathers, foster fathers, older brothers, cousins or family friends fill the physical role of father. Black communities have a collective responsibility to its children and each person should take an active role in being a parent, regardless of biology (Connor & White, 2011). Particularly in traditional Yoruban fathering, the failure of a biological father would disgrace his entire extended family and as such, the family would make provisions to ensure the welfare of the child in spite of a father absence (Nease & Austin; see Balogun, 2010). Research on the impact of communal parenting is still relatively untouched (Coles & Green, 2010), but this method of parenting offers great benefits to black children.

With regard to family structure, a considerable amount of discourse exists around the effects of the institution of slavery on the black family, and specifically the black father. According to Jennifer Hamer, slavery created the context of live-away fatherhood that was negotiated through “social, economic, and political institutions that were guided by systems attempting to sustain black people as a cheap labor source (Hamer, 2001).” Marriage between enslaved people was often encouraged as it produced steady labor for the slave owner, however, marriages between slaves often were not recognized or protected by the state (Hamer, 2001). Men could be sold away or otherwise separated from their children and were often in positions where they could not protect their families under the master. However, strengths that existed within this institution included fathers who were not necessarily bound to traditional gender roles and employed egalitarian approaches to parenting. Moreover, there were instances of fathers wanting to gain custody of their children even while they might have been absent due to having been sold or Civil War duty. However, in the event of being taken away from their families, men were comforted in knowing that their children would be cared for by the larger community

(Hamer, 2001). All of these things considered, although they may not have been the best of circumstances, are “make a way out of no way” approaches that involve fathers making the best they could out of their situations for their children.

Some scholars argue that the institution of slavery was detrimental to family structure and that black families have not recovered from that. Aird, following the tradition of E. Franklin Frazier and others, contends that because of slavery, marriage for black people was weakly established and therefore more vulnerable to societal changes that eventually weakened the entire institution (Clayton, Mincy, Blankenhorn; see Aird, 2003). Since however, declines in marriages, increases in divorce and increasing numbers of out of wedlock births is a matter of changing society and has affected people of all races (Clayton, Mincy, Blankenhorn, 2003; Connor & White, 2011; Coles & Green, 2010), it is unfair to assert that black people suffer the most from weakened marriages.

The period following slavery saw an overall increase in black men and women entering into marriage and producing children that lived with both parents (Hamer, 2001; Clayton, Mincy & Blankenhorn, 2003). In fact, such was the trend for at least 100 years after emancipation (Clayton, Mincy & Blankenhorn; see Aird, 2003). When economic shifts began to emerge that found black men in positions of unemployment, black women found marriage to them unlikely. Wilson describes male joblessness as having sharply increased since 1970 and such has shaped women’s attitudes towards marriage (Clayton, Mincy, & Blankenhorn; see Wilson, 2003). This lack of marriage however, does not decrease the number of births though many men feel as though they are not ready for marriage because of employment status or lack of opportunity (Clayton, Mincy & Blankenhorn; see Wilson, 2003).

2.3 Black Father Absence

The often-repeated 70% percent statistic might conjure actual images of invisibility on the part of black fathers. While there are indeed biological fathers who do not perform the father role for their children, there are many more who do and other father figures who step in to create male stability for children. Many biological fathers however, although not married to the mothers of their children, are still present, perhaps just in a different sense, since they do not reside with their children. To be clear, the dynamic of father “absence” is a dynamic that not only affects black families, but families of all races and ethnicities within American society (Clayton, Mincy & Blankenhorn, 2003). In fact, this has been the case since the inception of the Moynihan report; however, the black community has been the only one to endure intense scrutiny in the examination of a trend that is far reaching (Moynihan, 1965). Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* concluded in 1965 that Black families were a tangle of pathology because of the high numbers of female-headed homes. The Black matriarchy that plagued the Black family according to Moynihan, has been contested by numerous Black scholars. Robert Staples for instance calls it a myth and suggested that the Black woman had little power over her family or society (Staples, 1970). Andrew Billingsley called the report an “incorrect analysis of the relationship between Black families and white society. The Moynihan report had no interest in addressing the actual societal structures that were more detrimental to Black families than Black women, but at the time the report was released it served as a tool to justify the white supremacy and maintain the status quo (Murray, 1973). The Moynihan report did allude to, but did not directly address the phenomenon of out-of-wedlock births being something that all families were experiencing at the time. This marked the beginning of a shift in the dynamics of all families. Relatedly, Nock suggests that what we are experiencing in society

in the way of father absence and high divorce rates is the shifting of ideals of marriage, which of course is the often preferred context for a childbirth (Clayton, Mincy, Blankenhorn; see Nock, 2003). Ideas of marriage are in the midst of change because of the changes that have affected women within the last 40 years. These “casualties” however that we are experiencing should not produce a negative perspective about relationships, marriages and births, rather this period of discomfort is indeed necessary in order to “forge” new understandings of marriage (Clayton, Mincy, Blankenhorn; see Nock, 2003).

A new term should be employed when discussing black fathers. Actually, multiple terms are needed to truly encompass every single aspect that makes up the whole. *Absent*, in most cases simply is not an accurate term to ascribe to black fathers. “Absence,” contrary to popular belief, is actually negotiated in a number of ways that would prove that absence is not at all what is prevalent within the black community. This in no way asserts that there are not fathers who make deliberate choices to not remain involved with their children, however, the father issue may not be as bad as it is perceived. African American men are present in various roles, but these roles are minimized outside of African American communities (Ahadi, 2008).

2.4 Low-Income, Non-Residential Fathers and Child Support Policy

Although focus on low-income fathers and their absence or presence in their children’s lives is heavily researched, their own perspectives are often left out of the conversations (Jordan-Zachery, 2009; Hamer, 2001). Common factors that influence the fathering ability in the sense of providing financially are low academic achievement, unemployment, underemployment and incarceration (Hamer, 2001). This of course does not make them bad fathers. Rather, they negotiate fatherhood through whatever means they have available to them. It was not atypical to find these fathers offering more of themselves in presence or in-kind help (non-cash, but

materials needed for the child) in lieu of money, if there was a lack of that. This would be an example of a strength approach, looking at the good in the circumstances that Coles and Green argue for (2010). By centering the voices of the fathers who are living these circumstances, theoretical understandings and policy perspectives would be enhanced (Jordan-Zachery, 2009).

In the period of their lives where they are entering adulthood, many young fathers find themselves lacking sufficient resources to provide, and as I would argue, are attempting to establish themselves socially and financially. The area of transition of young adults into fatherhood is understudied but the transition has implications for young fathers and their behaviors and attitudes toward parenting. If it is known that education can help to secure a more stable future for their children, some fathers, if they graduate from high school, attempt to attend college in order to do so (Hamer, 2001). Often however, they are faced with the unfortunate decision of having to choose between school and taking on employment to care for their child. Taking on employment to care for their child takes precedence for obvious reasons, however, it does not allow for the creation of long-term sustainability. Leaving school further marginalizes the potential for stable employment, which might lead to a lifetime of arrearage accumulation and subsequent consequences ensuing for not having the ability to keep up child support payments. Not being able to make payments can lead to jail time which leads to being caught in another system that does not favor the well being of these men. Being involved in the criminal justice system creates more problems for these fathers already facing problems (Coles & Green, 2010). An additional factor impacting young fathers is that of being less emotionally mature and being less likely to understand their roles and responsibilities as fathers (Castillo, Welch, Sarver, 2010). As a result, according to their study, older fathers tend to be more involved and programming that would aid in stabilizing young fathers would yield results of more young

fathers being involved with their children (Castillo, Welch, Sarver, 2010). In a later study by Castillo and Sarver, however, they found that young fathers to be more involved than older fathers because older fathers might have more children and therefore their time would be split more than young fathers who typically had less children (2012). More importantly, younger fathers were found to be more involved because they had desires to give their children the parenting relationship they themselves lacked from their own fathers (Castillo & Sarver, 2012).

Child support policies were established to curtail poverty in families without fathers in the homes (Kahn & Kamerman, 1988) and to promote father involvement among these fathers (Coles & Green; see Mills, 2010). Such policies are misguided and written for white, divorced, middle class fathers who have the means to keep up payments but often may not do so; the policy does not consider low-income fathers who actually do not have the means but do have the desire to pay and be involved (Coles & Green; see Mills, 2010). Mills argues that such policies instead of increasing involvement, and decreasing poverty actually decrease involvement and do little to alleviate poverty among children (2010). The child support system is often biased towards mothers, making it fairly simple for them to apply for and receive child support, however, any modifications that need to be made because of changes to the father's income is particularly more difficult (Silver, see Williams, 2008 and Coles & Green; see Mills, 2010).

Some studies have found that strict child support enforcement actually has a positive effect on the involvement a father has with his children. Specifically, fathers were found to comply with child support orders and have greater contact with their children as a result of one study (Huang, 2006). Additionally, the stricter enforcement leads ultimately to a decrease in non-marital births and a decrease in the amount of men shirking their parental responsibilities (Plotnick, Garfinkel, McLanahan, Ku, 2006). Huang however does point to a potential of bias

because the data came from mothers (Huang, 2006). This is in contrast however to one phenomenological study that suggests that child support enforcement affected black fathers' ability to parent (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). Jordan-Zachery also found that when men had to deal with child support enforcement and court systems, they often felt that they were starting from a position of guilt and treated like criminals (2009). Additionally, after analyzing data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, it was found that formal child support orders can undermine relationships between fathers and children and can alienate fathers resulting in them being less involved in their children's lives (Harris, 2011).

Incarceration and child support are two governmental entities that find many black men within them. For whatever reasons, fathers may end up being incarcerated and unable to pay child support. This is classified as voluntary unemployment and therefore, child support payments continue to accrue in 18 states, for instance, despite the fact that these men are unemployed (Coles & Green; see Mills, 2010). Having accumulated such debt while incarcerated, more criminal penalties are imposed on these fathers. Upon release from jail, finding employment is difficult due to a criminal background (Hamer, 2001; Coles & Green; see Mills, 2010). Without the ability to find stable employment, these two systems work together to make it much more difficult for black men to ever get out of the cycle of poverty by limiting their job prospects and also by increasing the amount of debt they are in (Coles & Green; see Mills, 2010).

Mills' argument is that policy changes are more than necessary to reflect the realities of the black fathers that they affect. Some of the changes she suggests include: realistic payment calculations based on a balance of the needs of the child and the father's ability to pay, reducing administrative "red-tape" to allow for routine modifications based on income changes, assigning

a value to in-kind (non-cash) donations, establishing a system that monitors mothers' use of the funds (this is for fathers who feel their money is not being used on the child). Further changes that need to be made regarding policy include allowing payments to be counted as a tax-deduction for fathers, eliminating criminal consequences and establishing job training and employment programs for young fathers who are unemployed or incarcerated. Certainly these are feasible solutions that could lead to a greater involvement and compliance of child support by black fathers that would be reflective of their situations and acknowledge their efforts to parent.

2.5 Media Representations of Black Fathers

It is important to consider what the media is saying about black fathers because of the role that television plays in socialization in American society. Television among black people in particular is the preferred method for obtaining information and a primary source for socialization (Fouts & Vaughan, 2002). Additionally, African Americans have the highest level of consumption of television compared to whites and other ethnic groups; this is still true when variables are controlled for socioeconomic status (Ward, 2004). Because television viewership aids in cultivating expectations about the real world that coincide with media images, exposure to lazy, unintelligent, criminal, behavior by black people leads to black viewers believing what they view and attributing these behaviors to black people in the "real" world (Ward, 2004). Page (1997) refers to a collective image that is then compromised and causes black viewers to lack faith in themselves and their abilities; Ward (2004) refers to this leading to a low personal self-esteem and a low racial self-esteem rooted in beliefs of inferiority.

Historically, images and misrepresentations have been long and consistent and have served to keep African Americans in a marginal position (Morris, 2011). Images that were produced in America, Europe and Asia were often exaggerated with a purpose to prove that not

only were blacks different, but they were inferior as well (Morris, 2011). This deliberate negative portrayal helped to perpetuate racism and limit the social mobility of Black men into social positions of importance, influence, and power; black men had to always be defined as threatening (Morris, 2011). They also were used to justify discrimination (Hamer, 2001), allowing those who viewed them to not feel any conviction in the unjust treatment of black men. Hamer also points to the ways in which black people aid in the persistence of the stereotypes within our own forms of media such as black magazines and film (2001).

Discourse on the implications negative images have on viewers is wide reaching, since various images affect a range of different people socially and culturally. It would be important to consider the impact negative images of black fathers would have on all viewers that shapes the way we think about fathers and in particular, black fathers themselves. Since television is quite an effective socializing tool, and since black children may be more impacted by higher viewership, negative images could serve to perpetuate certain ideas about black fatherhood that young black boys are consuming who may eventually become fathers (Gadsden & Smith, 1994). Stereotypes that put emphasis on the deviation of black men from the white male standard have come to aid in the definition of reality for black men. There are rarely portrayals of black men as “strong, independent, successful or completely competent as fathers” (Hamer, 2001).

2.6 Research on Fatherhood and Black Men

It is more than necessary to examine the nature of black fatherhood through cultural lenses that allow the examination of fatherhood through the factors that affect black men as fathers (Ahadi). Interest in fatherhood, and scholarly research on fathers came out of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly surrounded by the changes that society saw for women. The changes, such as shifts in family dynamics, gender relations, men’s declining wages and women’s mass

entrance into the labor force, inevitably impacted men as well, (Marsiglio, et al., 2000). There are four main ways that fatherhood research has been previously approached. These four ways are 1) as a cultural representation within an ecological context, 2) as conceptualized diverse forms of fatherhood and father involvement, 3) as attempts to identify links between the father/child relationship and developmental outcomes in children and 4) as apart of a reciprocal process that is negotiated by men, women, children and other interested parties (Marsiglio, et al., 2000).

The positive aspects of black fatherhood are rarely valued and respected and the institution as a whole is frequently attacked (Morrell & Richter, 2004). Previous research that has been conducted on black men and fathers in particular, has focused on the problems that exist, specifically the presumed abandonment of family responsibilities (Hammond & Mattis, 2005). Hammond and Mattis point to Cazenave's research that calls for the exploration of complexities of masculine roles for African American men, such as race, age and relative social location, to name a few examples (2005). The deficit approaches to the study of black fathers reveals little about black men as fathers in that complex role and has "outlived its usefulness" (Taylor, Leashore, & Toliver, 1988). Furthermore, research that is gathered from mothers, divorced fathers, media and public perceptions (Julion et.al, 2007), is limited in scope and does not adequately represent the fathers who eventually suffer the brunt of consequences from policies that are established from this body of research. While these other perspectives are necessary (Marsiglio, et al., (2000), negligence should not occur on the part of obtaining the voice of the actual fathers. Because of this, researchers should be poised to come up with strategic and new innovative ways to identify and interview diverse and often hard to reach samples of men (Marsiglio, et al., 2000).

The common themes that reoccur in black father research continually places them in positions of irresponsibility, ineptness, powerlessness, and places the blame of social ills affecting their children, spouses, mothers of their children and black families in general on the absence of them (Taylor, Leashore & Toliver, 1988; Hamer, 2001). The deficit approach reveals little about contemporary fathers who are married or otherwise actively involved with their children (Taylor, Leashore & Toliver, 1988). Conversely, Ahadi offers that although research has historically been negative in nature, information can be gleaned even from these dismal stories that researchers can use to understand challenges faced by fathers who raise their children while maintaining integrity (Ahadi, 2008).

According to Coles and Green, fatherhood research is still limited in quantity and has typically only focused on non-marital, non-residential fathers and only occasionally, on married fathers (2010). Their suggestion is to widen the lens that looks at black fatherhood to include all aspects of black fathers and their various roles. This wide angled approach can lead to effective policies that are more representative of all fathers who play some sort of role in the lives of black children. Undoubtedly strength based approaches to research are essential to successfully addressing the broad nature of black fatherhood. Focusing on fathers and black men who parent could lead to research that compares black fathers to other cultures to find commonalities among parenting that can be addressed through policy (Coles & Green, 2010). Most importantly it is necessary to find new ways to inform popular culture and add to the discourse the positive aspects of black fathering to counteract the particularly negative narrative that accompanies black fathers (Coles & Green, 2010). Hip Hop for example, plays a significant role in disseminating information about the ways society thinks about black fathers and as such there

should be considerations made there (Silver, 2008). It is incumbent upon scholars to transform negative myths into positive statements about black fathers (Ahadi, 2008).

Similar to Fink-Jensen's analysis of fathers and their experience in transitioning into fatherhood, Marsiglio, Amato, Day and Lamb suggest that:

“The growing diversity and transitional nature of men's experiences as fathers in recent years also invites researchers to explore how structural, interpersonal, and individual level factors influence the types and intensity of men's commitments to their biological...children...understanding how fathering roles are defined, negotiated, and expressed in diverse contexts and transitional periods will become increasingly important” (2000, p. 1186).

Understanding this would be closely tied to specific policy initiatives related to paternity establishment, divorce, blended families, child support and visitation; equally important are pregnancy resolution dynamics, union formation and dissolution patterns as well as shifts in residency arrangements and how all of these work to affect father involvement in low-income environments (Marsiglio, et al., 2000).

2.7 Summary

This chapter discussed the literature that informed this study on a range of topics concerning Black non-residential fatherhood. Contemporary fatherhood, African centered fatherhood, Black father absence, child support policy, media representations and research on the Black fatherhood were examined for a better understanding of the undertaking of this study. The next chapter presents the methodology that was utilized for this study.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design of the Study

Research on black fathers typically follows the narrative of dysfunction and pathology as they relate to their family structure and their specific roles. As more African American scholars are suggesting and implementing new research regarding black fathers, this research is specifically interested in constructing meanings of black fatherhood directly from black fathers, making them the subject rather than the object to black fatherhood research. The study, which is qualitative, is not intended to be generalizable, rather, it focused on 12 fathers highlighting their individual experiences in negotiating fatherhood within their circumstances.

Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world (Creswell, 2013; see Denzen & Lincoln, 2011, p.3). With this approach, it is important for researchers to study subjects in their natural settings and make sense of the topic of study on the terms of the participants and what they offer. Offering a definition for qualitative research, Creswell proposes that:

“Qualitative research begins with assumptions and use of interpretive/ theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 44).”

Most importantly for this study, qualitative research “includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem and...a call for change (Creswell, 2013, p. 44).”

Including the voices of the participants is an important factor because it would allow for a clear understanding of the theoretical perspectives about Black fatherhood. In her study about fatherhood initiatives, Jordan-Zachery employed a phenomenological study that centered the voices of the fathers as program participants. This she contended was better for understanding a targeted population and to not keep their voices silenced (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). Her approach used in-depth one on one interviews to further comprehension. For the same reasons of understanding targeted populations, Hamer’s study employed in-depth interviews and participant observations. In addition to interviewing fathers however, she included perspectives from the children’s mothers, their children, and other family members when necessary in order to get a more well rounded perspective. Although my research does not include participant observations, and other perspectives, my focus on the specific population that is often silenced (Jordan-Zachery, 2009), will add to the research that could eventually lead to policy change.

In other ways, my research deviates from other studies that have limited perspectives to women and divorced fathers (Julion, et al., 2007). It also deviates from other research on fathers and child support that relied on national or state public data (Castillo, Welch, Sarver, 2010; Holzer, Offner, Sorenson, 2005; Peters, Argys, Howard, Butler, 2004). Public data is an important factor to consider for evaluating participation in the child support enforcement system, however, for my particular study, I am interested in personal narratives that will lead me a better understanding of this specific dynamic of fatherhood.

3.2 Population, Sampling and Data Collection Procedures and Rationale

Recruitment of participants was mainly facilitated through convenience samples followed by the snowball method. I identified three subjects that fit the criteria required for participation in this study from an earlier research project. These three subjects identified other potential participants who fit the study criteria. Upon identification, a preliminary screening took place to gain background information from the potential participant to determine if the individual fit my specifications. Once this was determined, an interview date and time was established. Additionally I used the word of mouth and notified people around me to help identify potential participants. Some of these participants then directed me to other potential participants. Flyers were posted at various barbershops around the city of Atlanta but yielded no participants. Finally, I contacted the administrator for the Facebook groups “Black Fathers” and requested to post in his group to solicit participants. I gained one participant from this Facebook post who met the criteria for the study.

12 Black fathers from Georgia participated in this study. Ages for the participants ranged from 24-49; the average age was 39-years-old. Of the 12, only two had not completed high school, five had completed some college, two were college graduates and one had a Masters degree.

I tried to make the interview locations as convenient as possible for the participants since they were not being compensated financially. Interviews were conducted at Georgia State University’s library, coffee shops and at participants’ place of employment. One interview took place in a study room at the library at Georgia State University. Nine interviews took place at either a Starbucks coffee shop or the Urban Grind coffee shop. The exact location was determined depending on what was closest and most convenient for the fathers. The researcher

provided food and beverage during these interviews. Because of scheduling conflicts, two interviews took place at the place of employment of the participants. One interview took place in the break room of a barbershop and the other took place in the break room of an automotive care shop. Fast food was provided to these two participants.

Interviews were recorded with the researcher's iPod using the Voice Memos application and were transcribed by the researcher. The recording device was password protected and only be accessible by the researcher. Before the interviews began, the participants were given a demographic sheet to fill out that indicated their age, the number of children they had, their current occupation, their annual salary and their education level. Additionally, they were given an informed consent form to sign to ensure that they agreed to participate in the study. I reiterated from the informed consent that the interview was entirely optional and that they could choose to resign from the interview if it became uncomfortable. Finally, they were informed that all information given would be kept confidential and that they would be identified in the study by a pseudonym chosen by the researcher.

In order to make the most of the interviews so to gain from participants what Rubin and Rubin (2012) refer to "rich descriptions," measures were taken to ensure that participants were comfortable. This comfortableness of participants then translated into open and honest responses to the questions. Not only did the location of the interviews have significant bearing on this but also, I considered the importance of relationship building to ensure this as well. Before the interview began, I discussed with participants my connection to the research and my reason for inquiring into the subject. Rubin & Rubin suggest that people are more willing to talk if they feel they share some personal connection to you (2012). The use of snowball methods from the initially identified participants helped to create shared social networks, which made participants

more comfortable in the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Rubin & Rubin also suggest that building a shared background prior to interviews can be helpful by participant observations (2012). Although participant observations were not of particular use in this study, the preliminary conversations that helped me determine eligibility for participation also helped to begin conversations with participants prior to interviews. By doing this, participants were a little more familiar with me and why I chose this research. As a result, they were more open in their answers when it was time for data collection.

I employed semi-structured interviews because there was a specific topic that was the focus and a set of questions that started the process. However, depending on the direction of the conversation, new questions were formulated based on responses and probing took place where needed in order to get the best responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

3.3 Instrument

I used semi-structured interviews in order to gain insight to how the participants defined fatherhood for themselves. I began with some questions that would guide the conversation and as other questions arose during the interviews, I would ask those to probe for more detail. The instrument was divided into four sections with questions that sought to answer the specific research question. The four sections addressed what it means to be a father, what are some sources for that definition, their experiences with the child support enforcement system and finally their feelings about the role that race plays in determining their meanings.

3.4 Data Analysis

For data analysis, in first level coding, the In Vivo coding method was employed to establish understandings of language, perspective and worldviews of the participants. In Vivo coding is beneficial considering the cultural background of the potential research group in

considering ways to completely understand and respect their perspectives and give them “voice.” During second level coding, focused coding was applied to identify themes and categories in order to streamline the responses and find commonalities that existed among all the participants. This will allowed for individual stories to be told as well as for connections to be made so that the research questions may be answered and speak to the fact that these experiences may be more common than what is believed.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity in this study results from what Creswell calls *clarifying researcher bias*. According to Creswell, clarifying researcher bias from the beginning of a study is important because it gives the reader an understanding of the researcher’s position and any biases or assumptions that exist that could impact the study (Creswell, 2013). “In this clarification, the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study” (Creswell, 2013).

3.6 Summary

This chapter provided details of the methodology of this research. The design of the study, study procedures, data analysis, and reliability and validity of the study were provided. A qualitative, narrative approach was used in order to give the participants voice. Participants were fathers who ranged in age from 24-39. In vivo and focused coding was used to analyze the data from this study and clarifying researcher bias was employed for reliability and validity. The next chapter discusses the results of the study.

4 RESULTS/FINDINGS

This chapter is presented in four sections that are as follows: the meaning of fatherhood, sources for their definitions of fatherhood, race and fatherhood and finally, barriers they experienced.

4.1 The Participants

12 Black fathers from the metro Atlanta region of Georgia participated in this study. Ages for the participants ranged from 24-49; the average age was 39-years-old. Of the 12, only two had not completed high school, five had completed some college, two were college graduates and one had a Masters degree.

Table 4.1 contains demographic information for each participant.

Table 4.1 Study Participants

Name	Age	# of Children	Education	Occupation	Annual Household Income
Matthew	40	5	Some High School	Master Barber	\$25,000-\$34,999
Walter	29	1	High School Graduate	Hospitality Industry	\$35,000-\$49,000
Blake	49	2	Some College: Not Currently Enrolled	Lead Auto Technician	\$35,000-\$49,999
Kyle	24	2	Some College: Not currently enrolled	Sales & Concessions Associate	\$15,000-\$24,000
Andre	27	6	Some High School	Bartender	\$15,000-\$24,000
Derrick	27	1	Some College: Currently Enrolled	Student/Retail	\$15,000-\$24,000
Allen	46	1	Some College: Currently Enrolled	Student	\$10,000-\$14,999

Ralph	38	3	College Graduate	Logistics Manager	\$75,000-\$99,999
Maurice	42	2	High School Graduate	Grounds Maintenance	\$35,000-\$49,000
Tyson	45	4	Advanced Degree	Biomedical and Healthcare IT	\$100,000 or more
Aaron	26	1	Some College: Currently Enrolled	Stock Associate	\$15,000-\$24,999
Jason	28	2	College Graduate	Marketing	\$35,000-\$49,000

Below are detailed descriptions of the study participants.

Matthew, a 40-year-old father with 5 children, has working relationships with the mothers of four of his children, but has dealt with the child support system intermittently with a fifth child and the child's mother. Matthew completed some high school and has career experience as a master barber; at one point owned his own barbershop. However, eventually he ended up having to close his shop because of financial hardship. He now works as a barber in someone else's shop.

Walter, a 29-year-old father of one, was previously married to the mother of his child. The child's mother registered him in the child support system during a period in which he experienced unemployment. He now works at a major hotel chain and is able to consistently provide monthly payments, but experiences issues with visitation due to his child and the child's mother living in a different state.

Blake, is a 49-year-old father of two children with two different women; he was married to the mother of his second child, who registered him into child support enforcement after their divorce. Blake has experienced difficulty with seeing his child due to his stringent working

schedule and the inflexibility of his child's mother. He has also experienced eviction from his apartment and has had to live in his car for a period of time.

Kyle, a 24-year-old father of 2 was registered in the child support system after the birth of his second child. Kyle was enrolled in college a few years after he graduated from high school. While he was in school he began to collect child support arrearages. He quit school and found a second job amidst stress and to pay up the arrearages.

Andre is a 27-year-old father of 6 and is registered in the child support system for one of his children by a woman whom he dated briefly. Andre was laid off from his job two years ago and has been working as a bartender ever since. He says that before being registered in the system, his children received more money per month. Once he was registered by one of the mothers, the amount of his contributions to his other children decreased because of the amount that was mandated by the court to be taken out for his one child.

Derrick, is a 27-year-old father of one who after repeated conflict with his child's mother, decided to register himself into the child support enforcement system. Although he showed some agency in registering himself in the system, he has not been immune to some sort of financial trouble. He stated that his dealings with the child support office have been mostly pleasant. He feels that his being in the child support enforcement office is a consequence of a poor choice he made in having a baby out-of-wedlock.

Allen is a 46-year-old father of one who is enrolled in child support enforcement for his child in Louisiana. Although time with his child is limited, he is committed to not being a "Disney dad," and ensures that time spent with his son is meaningful and that lessons are always imparted.

Michael, a 42-year-old father of two has spent over \$10,000 in lawyer fees over the course of 18 years attempting to straighten things out with his children's mother. He had trouble with this woman after having one child and sought to minimize tension by entering back into the relationship with her. After having a second child, he decided they could not work as a couple and more issues have ensued as a result.

Tyson, a 45-year-old father of 4, is freshly out of the child support enforcement system since his oldest daughter recently graduated high school. Tyson has experienced a job loss that negatively affected his ability to pay child support and experienced a judge who was unwilling to compromise on the monthly amount of child support.

Aaron is a 26-year-old father of one who was registered in the child support enforcement system when he was unemployed and unable to make consistent financial contributions. As a result, he experienced homelessness and repossession of his vehicle for a period of time while working to pay off the arrearages that he collected while unemployed.

Jason is a 28-year-old father of two who has had issues with visitation of his two young boys. At the time of the interview, it has almost been one year since he's been able to see his two young sons.

4.2 Overview of Themes

To decipher these constructed meanings, some of their sources for definitions of father were examined. Additionally, their perceptions about their race and fatherhood were considered as well as any barriers they experienced in their execution of fathering.

Data analysis revealed several themes and subthemes. None of the fathers felt that they were non-essential despite not having daily contact with their children. They all have experienced some degree of financial difficulty but persevered and found other alternate ways to

remain involved in their children's lives. Additionally, they discussed different ways they were involved with their children when they were able to spend time with them. The question about race yielded different responses from the fathers where some believed that it did indeed make their fatherhood experiences different, while others contended that race was no factor. Rather, race could sometimes be used as an excuse and that irresponsible father could be found across racial lines and as such, treatment or stereotypes were no different for Black fathers.

Table 4.2 Properties and Categories

Research Questions	Themes
What does it mean to be a father?	Providing for children Formation function
What are some sources for the definition of being a father?	Parental influences on their parenting Media is negative, but does not affect them
Barriers to fatherhood (child support, communication.)	Financial issues (shortage of money, homelessness, etc.) Acquiescing to the system Poor communication with mothers (Visitation as an extension, decision making)
What role does race play in their fatherhood?	Race helps to shape how others perceive them Race may be an excuse

4.3 The Meaning of Fatherhood

In order to develop a general understanding of what fatherhood meant to the fathers I interviewed, I asked them to define what fatherhood meant to them as well as where they got their particular definitions. Additionally, I inquired about their strengths and challenges as fathers, as well as what time spent with their children typically entailed. The responses that showed up here were setting examples, making sacrifices, setting foundations and helping to

shape their children to be the best person they could become. All of these descriptions of their fatherhood combine to reinforce what Hamer names as one of the more important components of Black live away fatherhood, which is formation function (2001).

"I love being a father"

The participants discussed in various terms what they felt was a general definition of fatherhood. Responses centered on being present and helping their children become the best person they could become. They also emphasized providing financially, as well as providing physical and emotional well-being. Finally, Matthew and Walter explicitly named their roles and methods as disciplinarians.

Ralph- "What it means to be a father to me is being there for your child in every aspect of the word, whether emotionally, physically, financially, just being there for your kid, and their wellbeing, letting them know what's going on in the world and what the world is going to expect from them and what they can expect from the world and just preparing them for that."

Like Ralph, Walter had a larger perspective on what his role was for his children:

Walter- "It's a responsibility to build for tomorrow, it's important for my children to be the best that they can be, to understand the responsibility of being who they are no matter what they choose to be. It is also my responsibility to give love, understanding and security."

Along the same line, Allen had this to say:

“A father is a person that pretty much guides you along your path in life, and kinda instills in you values that will facilitate you becoming a good person to be successful in life.”

Matthew held a more direct and traditional opinion of what a father was supposed to be for his children.

“A father is a caretaker, he runs the household, he is the disciplinarian; he is a role model and provides an example for his kids of what to be.”

For Kyle fatherhood meant sacrifice:

“To me a father is being there, taking care of their needs before your own, just being there everyday, watching them grow, help them be the best person they can be in life.”

All of these descriptions combined paint a picture of fatherhood in which fathers are caretakers, financial providers, set examples for morals and standards, acts as a disciplinarian, is present for their children and contributes to the physical, psychological and emotional needs of their children.

4.4 Sources of their Definitions

In order to further understand how they are influenced by various factors that shape their ideas of their roles as fathers, I asked questions about the relationships they had with their own

parents as well as the relationships they had with their children's mothers. I asked these questions because I wanted to know how these relationships that are apart of the microsystem helped to define their own approaches to parenting. I also inquired about their perceptions of the images of Black fathers in media and film and if and how these images contributed to their definitions. I wanted to know how interactions with this part of the macrosystem aided in developing their identities as fathers.

Of the 12 participants, three grew up in the same household as their biological mothers and fathers. One grew up with adoptive parents and one grew up with his biological mother and stepfather. The other seven grew up with primarily their biological mothers. Each individual's upbringing influenced their high level of involvement in their own children's lives in different ways.

In general, relationships with the participant's children's mothers were at best mostly cordial, but were frequently dependent on the current status of new relationships with other women and financial circumstances. Naturally, conversations with the mothers were limited and only were held regarding the child's needs at the time. All fathers had experienced difficulties at some point or were currently experiencing difficulties in communication with the mothers which led to difficulty with visitation with their children.

Finally, media images that portrayed Black fathers in responsible caretaking roles were limited according to the participants, but these images had no effect on how they thought of themselves personally as fathers.

4.4.1 Relationships with Parents

"I don't want my daughter to grow up wishing I had come around more."

Blake did not have a relationship with his biological father but recognizes his stepfather as a prominent father figure in his life. In this instance, Blake's stepfather took the place of father in the absence of his own father and influenced the way that he desired to parent his children.

"I really didn't have a relationship with my father and it was a loss, and that was something I didn't want my kids to go through. You know not having a father there. But I do have strong family ties through my stepfather he was there, and you know most of his family I consider family, his brothers I call uncle and stuff."

Both Kyle and Aaron did not have their fathers with them in the household growing up and both experienced their fathers intermittently throughout their upbringings. Neither however, expressed having animosity toward their fathers but they did use their experiences as reminders of why it is necessary for them to always try to be around for their children no matter the circumstances. They both described their childhood desires to have seen their fathers more and wished for more of a presence because they did feel that something was missing as result. They sought to minimize that feeling in their own children because of the pain that they experienced and did not want their children to have that same painful memory.

This emotional expression illustrates what may be a shift in non-residential fatherhood as it is indeed a fact that some Black fathers have been absent from their children for a number of personal and societal reasons. However, these fathers seem to be moving towards an empathetic fatherhood, which seeks to minimize painful emotions having felt those emotions themselves. This indicator of modern fatherhood that embraces emotion can be portrayed as a part progressive Black masculinity.

Kyle- “I pretty much grew up with mostly my mom, my dad was there when I was younger, it was like a 3 or 4 year gap when I didn’t see him and then I would see him from time to time. I see him more now, I talk to him a little more. It’s pretty okay now. The relationship was never bad, I wasn’t never one of those kids that had anything against him.”

Aaron mentions drugs and unemployment as reasons his father was not around frequently while he was growing up. Hamer discusses these factors as two of many reasons fathers left their children historically in her study (2001). Feelings of inadequacy ensue and cause fathers to leave their households and children.

Aaron- “My father was around in the beginning until I was about 7 and he and my mom broke up. I saw him on and off for the rest of the years I was growing up. I wished I could have seen him more, I think he was dealing with a lot of issues like drugs and unemployment, which is why he stopped coming around. My mom never tried to keep him away though. I try really hard to remain present for my daughter because I don’t want her to grow up wishing I had come around more like do with my dad.”

Matthew described his essential role as a father in a more traditional way that characterized him as a disciplinarian in the traditional sense. He alluded that his children’s mothers were incapable of disciplining his children correctly because they [the mothers] were too soft on them. He described a particular instance in which his son was having behavior issues in school but after having come to live with him, showed major improvement. It is because of the belief that his children will not be raised correctly, that no matter what is going on between him

and the mothers, he fights to be involved with his children. This is something that he says his father did not do and as a result he feels he missed out on something. Thus, this relationship impacts how he maintains involvement.

“My father wasn’t around but I know that was because of my mom; I remember him trying to be around for me. She was mad at him because they broke up. I just try not to let that happen with me, whatever I got going on, whatever they got going on I need to be with my kids myself cause it ain’t the same. Despite what the baby mama does, I try to have control of the situation because if I don’t basically, I feel like if I’m not there to raise my kids, they won’t be raised right.”

The participants who had a more stable interaction with their fathers shared how they use those interactions to shape their actions as fathers. They were able to use their more constant and direct interactions with their fathers to heavily influence how they parented their children. The more frequent interactions with their fathers help them to discern best practices from positive and negative aspects of their fathers’ parenting. This helps them in a way that is different from fathers who did not have their fathers perhaps because there are more concrete examples to model their own parenting after. The fathers who grew up without their fathers have to construct a fatherhood from an ideal based on deficits they experienced.

Walter- “My dad and I weren’t tight growing up, we became tight after I left the house and was on my own. I look at the good and the bad in my dad and keep both to help me be the father I want to be.”

Allen- “I think about how my father was...although my parents split up when I was three, he was always in my life...he would go out of his way to make sure that his presence was known and he was a very caring person, those things he passed on to me, and I saw them in him and I figured okay that’s what a father must be like so I incorporated that into my fatherhood.”

Allen explicitly discussed not wanting to be a “Disney dad.” This concept that Maldonado describes is the idea that when children are spending time with their non-residential fathers, that only fun activities take place (2005). Allen however uses his own father’s influences as a non-residential father to still be taken seriously and fulfill the role of father and not be perceived as just the “fun parent.”

Tyson- “I’m really unaware of how I mirror my father, but my mom always tells me I do. He’s passed away but my father was my cheerleader, he built my confidence and self-esteem...he still hugged me as an adult; he was always very affectionate with his children. My goal is to just be half man my father was. He was selfless, never complained, held two jobs, had unconditional love and was just a great example to follow.”

Tyson's father seems to have demonstrated tenants of progressive Black masculinity and heavily incorporated nurturing in his fatherhood which might have typically been reserved for mothers during the time in which he grew up.

4.4.2 Relationships with mothers

"I have to pry things out of her about my son."

Walter who divorced his wife of 8 years has difficulty communicating with his child because of the stepfather who has entered the picture. Walter's particular issue with his son's stepfather is an interesting paradox of fatherhood. On the one hand, the embrace of the stepfather as father can be viewed as an African centered approach to fathering in the community sense; biology does not confine fatherhood. However, it comes at the expense of keeping Walter out of most decisions concerning his son. Walter expressed that mainly conversations with his son's mother centered around his financial provision. Anything else was kept mainly within the household of which he had no part. This type of interaction embodies that of the exosystem, having no control over the way of life of his son in the other household while his household was also being impacted.

"I have to pry things out of her about my son. Because she has it in her head that his family is there. So to them I'm the outsider. He doesn't know me, he only knows what she tells him."

Communication with the child's mother is an important factor in child rearing for fathers who do not live with their child. Being that it is nearly the only access a father has to his child, it would be ideal for that part of parenting to go over as smoothly as possible. Not having a healthy

or productive line of communication could be a factor that influences parenting negatively as some fathers expressed. An already difficult situation is made more tense and has different implications on the rearing of a child. Kyle recounted a time when communication with his children's mother was nearly impossible. He names his children's mother's anger as the reason for the difficulty in communication. Another factor that impacted the communication and co-parenting was that he did not have the address to where his children resided. His children's mother had moved without notifying him of where they were going which according to him was in violation of the parenting plan that had been established. This further made communication challenging between the two. While he did not describe what had changed in the relationship that allowed them to be at a point of reconciliation, it was evident that he was optimistic about where these new open lines of communication could take the co-parenting relationship. The limited interaction that resulted from the no answers and the hanging up he describes also illustrate the limited say in decisions regarding his children.

“Right now we’ve gotten to a point where we can converse about different things. It used to be worse than that so we’re trying to build on that. Communication was difficult...I think pretty much out of anger, she would not answer when I called or hang up when she didn’t like something that I said.”

Blake described the relationship with his ex-wife as one that was non-existent. All communication goes through a third party. Whenever he wants to see or speak to his son, he has to call his ex-mother-in-law. Furthermore, he described the relationship between he and his child's mother as one that imposes on his ability to adequately be available for his son.

"I think a lot about how she thinks of me and that may prevent me from, from probably doing more. 'Cause see I wouldn't just go to her house to pick him up. That's not available to me so that would affect me going over there as much.

Andre faces a similar issue as Blake.

"All communication about my daughter goes through my mom. She'll [his daughter's mom] call my mom and my mom will call me and tell me what I need to do or whatever she said. It really works that way because I can't talk to her at all. We always argue."

Andre also stated that it is hard to do more for his daughter because of the relationship with her mother. He also expressed that he did not prefer the method of communication that was available to him. As a result of the non-existent communication with his ex-wife, Blake's interaction with his son is limited and Andre feels that it is difficult for him to do more for his daughter. These instances would be categorized under the mesosystem and illustrate how negative communication with the mothers of their children are hindrances to their parenting (Hamer, 2001).

"Sometimes I think if I could just talk to her like mature adults, then we could get a lot more done. Having the middle man kinda makes things difficult because then you involve somebody who really don't have nothing to do with what happened between you and the girl. Even though it's my mom, sometimes I don't want my mom to be involved in my stuff because it's my responsibility."

This sentiment can be compared to the involvement of the child support enforcement system where fathers feel that it is unnecessary to involve others in the dealings of the two people responsible for the child. Third party involvement for most of the fathers in this study complicated affairs and often was a hindrance to their approaches to parenting.

4.4.3 Media Representations

"I can't remember a good movie that had a Black father in it."

Generally, the fathers all agreed that there were no consistent positive images of Black men as fathers in television or film. They all unanimously agreed though that this did not influence how they felt about themselves as fathers, although they agreed it might have negative influences on other people who take in these images. There seems to be some self-work that occurs that aids these fathers in being able to reject the same stereotypes that have an influence on the way other races view Black fatherhood. Some fathers addressed simply seeing real life examples as a counter to what they saw on television and that helped them to not fall victim to the stereotype. It could be said then that perhaps the limited exposure other races of people have with Black fathers limits their ability to see past the negative images and discern that all Black fathers do not operate in the same manner.

Ralph- "The only good movie that I can think of where Black fathers are seriously portrayed as you know the father has done well is *Daddy's Little Girls*, Tyler Perry's movie. That's probably the latest movie I can think of, but for the most part, the father is absent, you know there's always the absent father and I think that is pretty much how

we're stereotyped. I don't think it influences me but I think it does have an influence on society and how the world sees Black fathers."

Blake- [laughs] "I can't remember a good movie that had a black father in it. *Good Times* or something like that, we're always broken down and trying to make it. I don't think we're dealt a fair hand. I don't think so, we don't have that many images of good families and father figures."

Kyle- "Pretty much the general image is not good; they're not there, they don't take care of their kids, they don't care about their kids, they'd rather do other things than be with their kids...you may see a few images of fathers taking care of their kids but not that much. I'm not influenced by what I see on TV, not at all."

Tyson- "I'm not pleased with the images, I'm not a big TV person--the black male is not portrayed in a strong light. *Father Knows Best*, *Happy Days*, *My Three Sons* those are the fathers I think about...as far as black fathers I can only think of Bill Cosby and James Evans. There are limited images of Black fathers. I think I'm a combination of both of them [laughs]. Cosby reminds me of myself and my father. The Huxtables did things that were familiar to me."

The limiting of television consumption as mentioned by Tyson, might be another method by which fathers reject negative stereotypes of Black fathers.

Jason- I'm not influenced by the images because I know they're not true. All I see is fathers being there and trying hard to remain there for kids. Something has to be done. I know there are men who don't take care of their children, but I think it's up to us to let everybody know that what they see on TV is kinda exaggerated. I don't know what it's going to take but we gotta let people see that Black fathers take care of their kids.

I found it interesting that these fathers listed James Evans of *Good Times* and Cliff Huxtable of *The Cosby Show* as their TV examples of fatherhood. These fathers, in combination, seem to embody how these fathers have defined fatherhood for themselves. On the one hand, James Evans is the traditional, patriarchal, head of the household provider and disciplinarian that shows little emotion except for anger towards his children; the personification of dominant White fatherhood. Cliff Huxtable on the other hand embodies more of a contemporary or progressive portrait of fatherhood. He is all the things that James Evans is, except not so much a disciplinarian and is nurturing towards his children. This dichotomy of television fatherhood may be the result of the difference in a mostly white production team (*Good Times*) and a production team that includes more Black people (*The Cosby Show*).

4.5 Race and Fatherhood

After a foundation was laid for a general idea of fatherhood, I inquired about the ways they thought their race impacted how they and others perceived them as fathers. More than half of the fathers who were interviewed believed that there were some ways that race affected their approach to parenting and how people perceived them as fathers. They mentioned stereotypes

that existed but also that it was necessary to overcome those and not become caught up in what others thought.

Five of the fathers thought their race had nothing to do with their parenting and that it was either non-existent or that it was used as an excuse.

"I can't help but think, 'would you ask that if I were a white man?'"

Tyson described how he felt others perceived him as a father based on the fact that he was Black.

"I have four kids. The last three are with my wife, my first one I had with my ex-girlfriend while we were in grad school. When I tell people I have four kids, they say 'are they all by the same woman?' Although they happen not to be, I can't help but think, 'would you ask that if I were a white man?' As a Black male, you get extra scrutiny, it's different, people still see you as less than, because I'm Black you think I'm not involved. But I don't get my validation from others; the only way I'll feel emasculated is if I make myself feel that way. I know I've gone above and beyond and I don't have to prove anything to anyone."

The assumption that because he is a Black father with four kids leads others to believe that there must be multiple mothers of the children because of the way people perceive Black fathers. This question further assumes that there are absolutely no other races of fathers who have multiple children and multiple mothers. The most important thing said by Tyson however is that he feels he does not have to prove anything to anyone. Understanding that as a Black male people already have preconceived notions of him and how he fathers, is something that he does

not allow to weigh in on his parenting. Much in the way that he is able to reject the stereotypes in the media, he is also able to reject real-life instances of those stereotypes playing out. As a result, it appears that in the face of stereotypes of Black fatherhood, it is incumbent upon fathers to find ways to self-affirm and self-define themselves in order to reject the stereotypes and parent at a level that is satisfactory to themselves.

Allen felt an extra responsibility as a Black father.

Allen- “This goes back to your question about images, since the images are negative about Black fathers, I feel like I kinda have to do extra to counteract that you know. So race plays a huge part because since we’re labeled as people that wanna have a bunch of babies all over the place and not take care of them you know it’s like I gotta prove that—or debunk that myth you know. Or debunk that stereotype.”

He went on to say:

“People stereotype you all the time, that’s just normal, people look at you at make judgments, that’s the way of life, I just get used to it. I can’t let those things to affect me negatively because it’s more important for me to do the right thing in terms of being a father and go about the business of being a father rather than to listen to all those stereotypes and stuff because they’re going to be there regardless of what you do.”

In his first statement, Allen describes the notion that he thinks he has to perform in an extra capacity as a father in order to validate himself as a Black father to other people. Because of the stereotypes that exist, he feels the responsibility to prove through his fatherhood that Black fathers are responsible, that there are good Black fathers who

exist and take care of their responsibilities. On the other hand, he describes what might be a coping mechanism in that it is known that people will stereotype and make judgments about people they do not know, but that that cannot be a hindrance in one taking the more important responsibility of caring for one's children.

Ralph expressed that although all fathers might face hardships, as a Black father he felt he had something to prove.

Ralph- "I don't know how to say there's a difference. I know a white father who had a specific incident that would be similar to some that I've experienced... I do think you definitely you have to over prove yourself. Cause we're looked at as we're not there, we're absent fathers, you have to go above and beyond. You just have to prove that you're a good man."

Jason- "I definitely think so, I've thought about how I should write a book documenting the experiences of Black fathers because I think it's something different about it. Like the way I have to battle everyday for the opportunity just to see my kids, it's just so many aspects...the stories I've heard from other guys are heartbreaking. We're just trying to do the best we can. Yeah, the book thing I've definitely thought about doing once I'm whole again."

This idea of proving and over-proving as fathers came up with multiple fathers in this study. In addition to the difficult relationships that may exist with their children's mothers, or their interactions with the child support enforcement system and family courts, there is an extra charge where they now have something to prove to others about who they are as fathers on behalf of all Black fathers. The question can be asked then what about the fathers who do not have this positive approach to the responsibility or have the mindset to keep moving in spite of what others think? There might definitely be something to the idea that these fathers experience something missing, as indicated in Jason's statement about not feeling whole. How might these fathers be dealing emotionally with many pressures and what might the macrosystem be doing to and for them that needs to shift in order to produce a culture where healthy Black fatherhood is the norm?

Conversely, Walter felt that race was sometimes used as an excuse.

Walter- "I don't think race has anything to do with it, I think it has more to do with your upbringing. If you want something find a way to get it, get it the right way—race is just an excuse sometimes, you're a man, be a man. There's rules set and either you abide by them or you gon' lose. I'm not gonna say the judge treated me differently because I am Black."

Walter seems to disassociate himself from the idea that because he is Black, he experiences the family court and child support systems differently. Although he acknowledges the stereotypes about Black fathers in the media and he acknowledges

unpleasant treatment from the court and child support systems, they are a result of him simply being absent from the home in which his son lives, it is not attributable to the fact that he is a Black man. Walter contends that all fathers who are in his particular situation face the same troubles no matter their race. While this fact may be true, it is not unreasonable to conclude that there are different experiences based on race and that marginalized populations experience fatherhood differently. For instance, economic and educational factors affect Black fathers differently because these are institutions that they have historically and to some extent are still excluded from. So, unemployment and child support payments for a Black father with no employment, wealth or assets to pass to his children, has different implications from a white father whose access to resources may be much more broad. So it may not be the race alone but perhaps the implications of race in America and the components of Critical Race Theory that posit that racism is deeply embedded within American culture and the components of the macrosystem that have the greater impact on how Black fathers experience fatherhood within American context.

4.6 Barriers to Fatherhood

As fathers, the participants all experienced a range of barriers that impacted how they related to their children. I asked questions about their dealings with the child support enforcement system and how they were treated generally by the administration. I wanted to know if this affected their ideas of themselves and other Black fathers. They discussed to varying degrees issues they had experienced financially, issues with visitation, consequences from the enforcement agency and their roles in decision making with their children.

4.6.1 Financial Issues and Treatment from Child Support Administration

“When that money gone, that money gone”

After constant back and forth with his child’s mother about how frequently money should be provided and how it should be used, Derrick placed himself in the child support enforcement system. As a result, his experiences, he felt were a consequence of having a child out of wedlock. He felt that whatever treatment or financial hardships he experienced after child support was taken out was warranted because of his poor decision-making. Basically, he was being punished for committing a sin.

“I put myself on child support. It got to a point where we couldn’t even communicate so I figured that it would be easier to involve them [child support enforcement] to kinda minimize the tension between us. As a result, I don’t think I’ve experienced anything that wasn’t warranted. I mean I put myself in this situation when I chose to have unprotected sex so it doesn’t benefit me to be mad at the system for doing their job. They gotta make sure my child gets what he needs, so that’s what I do and when that money gone, that money gone.”

Allen did not have an issue with the treatment from the court and the system, rather it was the way his child’s mother portrayed him to authorities with which he had an issue. This description illustrates his sentiment that the family courts and child support system show bias towards the mothers of children and fathers are at the whim of the mother’s.

Allen- “I signed the papers, and you know just to keep them off my back you know. Most of the treatment I received, the treatment was not...I don’t think it was bad, it was just the interaction I had with her in the courtroom, the way she tried to paint me as a deadbeat dad and it seem like the court system was on her side, in her corner, they didn’t care about me you know, that’s how I felt. But I can’t... I think most of the animosity I felt about the court system was based on her and her portrayal of me, because they kind of fed off of her negative attitude about me. Now if she had said nicer things about me I think the court system would have kinda followed her lead.”

Although Blake felt he was blindsided during the process of establishing child support and feels that he overpays child support every month, he has an apathetic view of the entire set up.

“It is what it is. Actually I was kinda railroaded with mine, because they based my child support based on income that superseded what I make. They had used checks that I actually had overtime on and when I was in mediation I told them that’s not how much I make you know they based it all around those pay stubs because her lawyer had put those papers in, ‘this is what you make’ you know that’s not all the time, my hours are based like off a commission so, that is what I’m paying, all the overages and stuff like that, it’s a lot more than it should be.”

He further mentioned that he felt powerless in the situation and had to learn how to make do with whatever is left in his checks when he does not make enough money to provide for himself and his son.

“They gonna take it irregardless, if it leaves me with \$50 for that week, that’s what it leaves me with, they take it first, it’s like taxes. And there have been weeks where (he begins to sound somber) I wonder how I’m going to do anything with this. And I’m left with scraps. It’s rough, there’s times when...I lost my little apartment which I was paying like \$450 and I had to live in my car for like 3 months and that’s having a 40 hour job, you know working everyday, you know that’s demoralizing, depressing, I don’t think nobody should have to go through that but, you know...(shakes his head) not working everyday.”

Walter mentioned that he understood the reason the child support system existed was to provide for the child, so he harbored no animosity toward them for “doing their job.” However he did express that:

“When I’m a single male and I make less than what their household makes and you take a majority of my money, it does affect me. I was homeless at one point in my life and it just stacked and stacked and stacked, nobody cares that you’re homeless, nobody cares what the situation is and whenever you lose a job, especially when payments are so high it does affect you...they’re fine, they’re doing good, but she can use that against you. It’s bothering. You gotta do what you gotta do, especially when you put somebody like child support in between you.”

Ralph described a payment modification review he experienced that left him feeling powerless.

“I was making \$60,000 and I had lost my job, so the modification review came about and I wasn’t making that anymore I went from \$60,000 to making \$14 an hour so I went before the judge, court and everything and showed the documents and they crucified me because I had lost my job. Well what do you mean? Things happen, situations change... I had to pay the same amount and I said well that’s going to take 60% of my income and I still have another child to take care of...I felt that the court had no bearing on the situation and going in there without an attorney I feel like the system will take advantage of you, I felt like because I didn’t have an attorney I got raped.”

Ralph also described one experience he had that led him to believe that the system shows bias toward the mothers.

“And they claim that it’s in the benefit of the child but it’s more so in the benefit of the mother, the custodial parent which is nine times out of ten the mother. My oldest child came and lived with me, her mom shipped her to GA, signed the papers giving me custody and then went and filed a modification to increase her child support and the child was with me. So I had to go to court to fight that like three months later.”

Kyle expressed that the court got in the way of healthy communication and was not necessary if a father had shown that he was willing to provide and be present.

Kyle- “I don’t think it’s necessary to be on child support if you’re there for your child, but I guess that’s a way for her to not have to communicate with me and still get what she wanna get. When I went to court, they really didn’t care about how much you make, they look at what she say she pay month and pretty much base your child support off of that.”

Overall, there was an idea that the court systems and child support are set up in favor of the mothers of children and not in the best interests of fathers. This is further illustrated by stories of fathers describing how they are left to figure out how to make a living for themselves after they have contributed to the financial well-being of their children. They have no say in the amount of money that comes out of their checks and have no say in the ways in which the money is spent. As a result, their own well-beings are challenged because the priority is not to maximize time with their children, but rather, to consistently provide yourself. This can be supported by the argument by Kahn and Kamerman that suggested that the child support system was established essentially to replace fathers in households that did not have them (1988). This is done with no regard to the father’s lifestyle.

An apathetic feeling was expressed by some of the fathers in this study in that they felt powerless and lacked the resources to hire an attorney that could successfully navigate them through the system and the court processes. The feeling of doing what had to be done in spite of the results on them, illustrated their continued dedication to being the best father they could to their children. The fathers lost pieces of themselves and their comforts in efforts to make sure their children had what they needed by any means

necessary. Ralph's specific story illustrates the complexities of the system in that one child loses out on his financial provision because of the high amount that is taken out for another child. This exemplifies the deficiencies of the system and the inadequate look that courts and systems really take on families to ensure the best possible outcomes for all those involved.

4.6.2 Consequences

"I can't get a passport because of this"

Kyle got to a point where he began to fall behind in child support payments while enrolled in college; as a result he had his license suspended. He also shared inefficiency in the collection process and how he has to maintain his quality of life after having the majority of his checks taken weekly by child support. In order to catch up on his payments, he quit school and got a second job. This decision of quitting school in order to provide financially in the moment perpetuates a cycle of poverty in that Kyle may not be able to provide for his children long-term if he cannot complete college and find sustainable employment for himself.

"I fell behind and they suspended my license. I was in school so I fell behind and my license was suspended, I went to go renew them and they were like they're suspended. I got a paper in the mail saying that they might be suspended but I never got the paper saying they were suspended definitely. So I had to wait til I caught back up, they was taking extra out my check to try to pay it back, so instead of 376 a month I was paying 640 a month and like I said they really don't care much about what you got going on, don't try to leave nothing extra for you to live off of, the system just automatically take it

out your check each week. I just recently caught back up and they were still taking out the extra and I called to check on it and they said they had to fill out paperwork for it to stop and that it would take a couple weeks so the extra would still be coming out. So now I'm ahead. I just gotta try to maintain with whatever is left."

While Aaron was out of a job, he collected arrears and had his license suspended. Once he was able to find a job, he drove illegally for a few months in order to get to work to be able to pay the child support arrears.

"It was frustrating because here I was trying to do better, to get some employment and when I did I was riding dirty the whole time. Like, everyday I got in the car to go to work I was nervous. And it the job that I was able to get was like 30 miles. There was no public transportation out there so I had to drive illegally to get to the only job I could find at the time."

The suspension of the driver's license appears to be counterproductive to the desire of the court for father's to provide. If there is an instance where a father can only obtain a job that requires him to commute and there are no options to ride public transportation, having a license suspended can hinder an attempt to get to work, to make money to provide for his children.

Both Ralph and Tyson had problems obtaining passports for themselves.

Ralph- “I couldn’t get a passport during that time because it showed up that I had arrears, like I’m going to try to flee the country to get out off paying.”

Tyson- ‘It was actually embarrassing for me at one point. I had gotten a new job and they wanted me to go out of the country for a conference and so I went to file the papers to get a passport and couldn’t get one because of child support arrears I collected when I was unemployed. It was embarrassing to have to go to my boss and say ‘I can’t get a passport because of this.’”

The consequence of passport revocation or the inability to obtain a passport suggests that fathers might be motivated to flee the country in order to get out of paying support. Again, Tyson needed a passport for work purposes, which, similar to the license suspension, gets in the way of a father being able to provide for his children.

Matthew experienced the consequence of jail time.

“It got so crazy one time, she had made it seem like I owed all this money, like I never paid her anything and they sent me to jail. That was when I lost my [barber]shop.”

As a result of jail time, Matthew not only obtained a criminal record, but also lost a means of income for himself, lost time from his children, and collected arrears while he was in jail and could not make child support payments. All of these factors are such that it impeded his ability to father his children adequately.

“Every father is treated like a deadbeat dad”

Despite any efforts to provide and be present with their children, the fathers felt that systems generally believed that all Black fathers were deadbeat and treated them as such. These experiences may be influenced by the media, the mothers and policies about non-residential fatherhood (Julion, et al., 2007).

Ralph- “Every father is treated like a deadbeat dad. If you go in there they don’t help you; if you go in to ask for help it’s like so cold, it’s very cold and it’s just not a welcome system. You’re not helped you have to ask precise questions and then you have to pretty much divulge everything about your life—how much do you make, how much do you pay for entertainment, who cares about how much I go to the movies, how much do I spend on clothes why?”

Jason- “Every father is treated like he’s a deadbeat, no matter if you go and try to prove all the stuff you’ve gone through just trying to be there for your kids. They don’t ever look at what the mom is doing to prevent me from seeing my kids. I’m just a deadbeat because I chose not to stay with their mom.”

Kyle- “They think everybody is a deadbeat so not me but a lot of men kinda give up because the mothers and the system makes it hard, it helps the mother out, it really doesn’t help the father out. A few people I know gave up, stopped trying. It’s definitely

hard after while, keep trying, keep trying, not making any progress on the situation, so I mean it's hard, a few times I almost gave up, at the end of the day, I just thought about the kids and continue to try."

Every father expressed being treated like a deadbeat father and that overall, all fathers who enter the court and the child support offices are never given a chance to demonstrate who they are actually. Rather, the image is already for them and as a result the cookie cutter process is applied to them no matter how they might be different from what is perceived as normal from the court and child support system. As Kyle suggested, this is the reason why some fathers simply stop trying to be apart of their children's lives. They feel as though they are not adequate enough for the role and as a result families may suffer from the absence. All ways of parenting should be considered by the systems to validate and encourage fathers to remain involved no matter their financial status.

4.6.3 *Decision Making and Fatherhood*

"I gotta ask permission"

Because the fathers were not able to spend time daily with their children, something they all named as a tenet of good fatherhood, they felt unable to speak about much regarding what their children did. There was a general idea that what they had to say about what their children did was not valued by the mother and that at the end of the day, she had the final say. Because of the way emphasis is placed on financial provision, these fathers felt that their input was only valued when it concerned them providing money for their children. Any other decisions about

daily activities were off limits. Two people were responsible for creating the child, however often two people did not make decisions for the child.

Blake-“He wants to play football. It takes a village really to raise a kid and I may have friends you know that possibly could help but I’m not there everyday to say well Elijah needs to do this and you know what I mean, when you’re not there, when you’re not in that house when he comes in from school, I have to ask questions, how’s he doing in school, you know you wanna be involved, you know but when you don’t have that communication between the two you know what’s going on...is it okay for him to play ball? Do I allow him to go to such and such house to do what he needs to do, and I’m not able to make those kinds of decisions, be more involved, so it would help if I could be there more.”

Walter- “His mom feels like her husband is his dad and they choose whatever they choose to do.”

Michael- There was a time her [his child’s] mom said she [his daughter] wanted to be in girl scouts. I don’t really care for girl scouts and thought that maybe she should look at some other programs for her to be involved in. But I felt like I couldn’t express that opinion. She didn’t call to ask me what I thought about Girl Scouts, she just called to ask for the money to get her started in the program.

Walter also felt that he had no say or control over the environment his son lived. He expressed some desires of what he wanted to happen ideally.

“Being able to have my son when I want and as long as I want, being able to understand his living conditions completely and being able to communicate like adults [wants to come together to be one accord with parenting so son doesn’t receive conflicting messages] Leave the past in the past, understand that people make mistakes in life. Get over and move on for my son. She never calls me about my son, the only phone calls I receive from her is when she asks ‘where’s my money, I don’t care if you’re homeless, I need my money.’ It’s never ‘I’m bringing my son to you.’ You asking me to do a whole lot more because I have to travel, rent a car, find somewhere to stay to get my son on top of everything else, rent everything else. Is it fair? No. A lot of women feel entitled because they held them for nine months. If I could I would, but I just can’t. You chose to lay down just like I did...you carried him for nine months, that excuse is getting old.”

4.7 Summary

In this chapter, participants discussed what they thought it meant to be a Black father. Having to deal with the child support system has affected all of them in one way or another and they expressed feelings of helplessness. In spite of these circumstances, they named ways that they tried to remain involved and discussed different activities that prove their involvement with their children. Finally, the participants discussed the role that race played in shaping their individual fatherhood understandings and meanings.

5 CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter is divided into four parts beginning with themes that emerged in relation to the literature and theoretical framework. Second, implications of the study are discussed, followed by recommendations for future research. Finally, the conclusion from the study is presented.

5.1 Discussion

Ecological Systems Theory or Human Ecological Theory posits that human development is characterized by interaction with 5 subsystems or “layers of environment.” The five subsystems are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The microsystems have the most immediate and direct impact on an individual as it includes family interactions, school and religious affiliations, neighborhoods and peers. The relations and links between microsystems characterize the mesosystem, for instance, a family experience that could be related to a work experience. Additionally, this entails the relationships with mothers of the father’s children, any new relationships fathers enter and any new jobs or education endeavors. The exosystem involves the links between a social setting in which the individual does not have an active role and the individual’s immediate context. These are institutions in which the fathers may never enter but affects what happens in their immediate environment. Additionally, economic factors such as job opportunities and job stability characterize the exosystem along with any social, cultural and political institutions. The macrosystem is the culture in which the individual lives. Examples include socioeconomic status, race, dominant customs or values. Finally, the chronosystem is the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course as well as sociohistorical circumstances. Examples include changes in relationships, work, or work opportunities for women on a broader scale.

This theory was applied to this research to aid in discovering the meaning of fatherhood by looking at Black fathers' interactions with each system.

5.1.1 The Microsystem

Given the history of Black fathers in the American context, participants in this study were wide ranging in their own relationships with their biological fathers as well as with fathers who were not biological but experienced an African centered approach to fatherhood which does not end at biology. Of the 12 fathers interviewed, six grew up in households with two parents; four with both their biological father and mother, one with his biological mother and stepfather and one with two adoptive parents. The remaining six participants lived with their mother only and remember moments with their own fathers as being pleasant overall although they did not share a household. These fathers did wish to have seen their fathers more, but held no negative feelings toward them about it.

These varied dynamics of the parental relationships of the participants each influenced them in ways that affected their own approaches to parenting. For the fathers who grew up with fathers in the household, they each found themselves trying to embody that father figure in their parenting styles. For the fathers who did not grow up in households with fathers, their approach to parenting was characterized by the desire to minimize feelings of longing they experienced as children in their own children.

One of Ralph's family influences was made evident by sentiments expressed by his mother.

“My mom definitely doesn’t like the fact that I have three children with three women, even though I was married at one point. Of course because of her values, she’d like to see me in the same situation that she and my dad had.”

Ralph also mentioned the resource that he has in his father who helps get him through his own fathering.

Matthew, whose father did not share a household with him, recalls his father wanting to be around.

“I watched my mom push my father away when I was kid. She was mad because they broke up and I had to deal with not seeing my father often because she was mad. I try real hard to let that discourage me when it comes to my own kids. A child needs their father no matter what the relationship is with the baby mama.”

The microsystem as the most immediate and direct interaction fathers have heavily influenced how fathers defined fatherhood for themselves. Each father possessed a desire to be involved with his children and that desire was directly correlated to his experience with his own father. In this sense, fathers either worked from an already established model of fatherhood or created one from what they lacked as a child. Each different foundation however led to high involvement in their children’s lives. Elements of the microsystem have an indirect influence on the individual. It was important to examine this level of relationship in determining what fatherhood meant for these fathers.

5.1.2 The Mesosystem

The mesosystem describes how family dynamics may affect or influence new work or education experiences. For example, there were fathers who expressed in this study that they had

previously been enrolled in some higher education, but as a result of child support obligations, found it necessary to forgo pursuing further education in order to make arrangements to pay child support as a short term goal. Hamer discusses this dynamic in her study of Black fathers (Hamer, 2001). Black fathers are made to forfeit decisions that may set them up for better financial circumstances in the future in order to mitigate as many issues as possible with the child support system. Kyle and Aaron both experienced having to drop out of college for the purposes of securing employment in order to keep up with their child support payments. They relinquish the opportunity to set themselves up securely financially for the long term with the desire to keep up the payments with child support. This is a decision that could ultimately mean less stability for them and their children, thereby creating what seems to be a cycle of poverty at the expense of wanting to avoid being consumed as much as possible by the system.

Conversely, when gainful employment is held by a father, as Tyson illustrated, being in the child support system has kept him from getting a passport at one point when he was required to travel on business.

Furthermore, the mesosystem includes relationships that the fathers have with their children's mothers and any new relationships that the fathers enter into. This particular relationship has some bearing on the relationship that a father has with his child as the mother can either encourage or hinder a father's involvement (Hamer, 2001). Some of the fathers did address the ways in which difficult communication and other tensions between themselves and mothers had indeed hindered the way they were able to be involved and parent their children. Although there was a desire to be involved with their child, this interaction while not affecting their definition of fatherhood, did affect the ways that they acted out their parenting.

The final component of the mesosystem was illustrated by Tyson describing the relationship with his current wife being difficult at times because of the issues that he has with his child's mother. Entering new relationships influences the level of involvement a father has with his non-residential children (Hamer, 2001). Tyson discussed how at times, it was difficult to manage the two environments that impacted each other indirectly as a result of him.

5.1.3 The Exosystem

The exosystem includes institutions that exist that a father might not ever have access to, but in some ways it affects his immediate environment. On a larger scale, this includes the economy, social, cultural, and political environments. Fathers' employment greatly influenced their parenting because of the way that American society views fatherhood. The financial provision for children takes precedence over all other facets of fatherhood. During difficult economic times, the loss of a job by a father often meant the loss of visitation and interaction with his child. This heavily influenced how they thought about parenting and how they evaluated their roles according to what was prescribed by American culture.

At some point over the course of their lives, all of the participants experienced job loss that led to them struggling to make child support payments or causing them to make major rearrangements in order to keep up the payments. This speaks to the instability of employment that often affects Black men, especially those without a college education. However, as indicated in this study, even the father with an advanced degree lost his job at one point.

Some of the fathers expressed feeling like they had no control over the lives of their children. This was especially difficult for Walter whose son lived with a stepfather. Aaron found out after a time that his daughter did not have health insurance and had to make provisions with his job to get coverage for his daughter. This example shows the way in which Aaron because of

his non-residential status will never have the opportunity to participate in his daughter's healthcare decisions but he's the indirect provider of her healthcare coverage.

5.1.4 The Macrosystem

In this study, the macrosystem consisted of the black culture influences on fatherhood law and policy, ideal dominant fatherhood and media perceptions about fathers. In general all of the participants agreed that the media depictions of Black fathers were limited and tended to be negative. The only ones that most could recall were those of James Evans of *Good Times* and Bill Cosby of *The Cosby Show* who could be viewed in a more positive light. Regarding how they thought it affected their ideas about their own fatherhood however, they believed that while it may have influenced the way that other races of people viewed them, it did not skew the perceptions of themselves. Tyson remarked that one of the main reasons why these images did not influence him in this way was because of how he grew up watching fathers parent their children, as well as he has seen and participated in fatherhood groups where Black fathers are active in the lives of their children. Jason shared a similar sentiment.

The concept of a Disney dad is such that he is a father who when given the opportunity to spend time with his children, only fun is experienced. Allen flatly stated that his intention was to not be a "Disney dad" when it came to quality time with his son. Because he does not get to see his son often because of him being out of state, he takes the moments he does have to impart knowledge and wisdom. The participants all shared this sentiment although they did not refer to this term specifically, none of them wanted to just be the "fun" parent. The misconception can be held that fathers who only see their children on the weekends are not "real parents." However, the participants gave a myriad of examples of the ways in which they do in fact parent. These

activities ranged from reading with and completing homework with their children. Aaron and Ralph described how they cook breakfast for their children. Aaron also combs his daughter's hair from time to time. Kyle and Joseph teach their children how to read and write and play sports. The participants also mentioned their roles as disciplinarians and the importance of a father's discipline. Tyson described the discipline as stern yet patient. He acknowledged the father's role as a cheerleader, helping to mold his children into the best "them" they could be.

"My thinking is that I am supposed to be slow to condemn, quick to congratulate, build you up and sing your praises. I express a love and appreciation for their hard work. My love is not conditional. It's motivational, I help them believe in themselves. Let them know, you can be as great as you want to be in spite of what you're feeling, you're better than this, I have to keep them motivated."

This was in line with Ahadi's description of the role of fathers, which was to provide guidance, love, quality time, and listen to their children and build their self-love and self-esteem. Fathers are also slow to criticize, practice non-violence and share an equal role in housework (Ahadi, 2008).

Although the participants all expressed a desire to be in their children's lives more, the most difficult part of being a father was their dealings with the child support enforcement system and communication with their children's mothers. In general, the belief was that for fathers who showed effort to provide and be present for their children, the child support enforcement system was not necessary. Because of the prevailing notion of Black fathers being deadbeat, the participants commented on how they felt they were treated as deadbeat fathers. While describing

his experiences, Ralph's speaking voice intensified and his body language illustrated the passion with which he despises the child support system.

"The administration is cold. It's not about helping you as the father at all. The system isn't designed to be fair, it isn't designed for a father to spend time with his child...you have to design your lifestyle around the child support. You have to divulge all parts of your life, how much you make, how much you spend in every area, but they don't account for day to day expenses that are hard to cover because the child support payments are so high. So then you end up not being able to do more for your kids because you don't have any money...I think child support ends up having an effect on how involved fathers are."

Kyle described how he felt run down by the child support system and how at times he's considered giving up on trying to be involved in his children's lives because of the run around. He expressed how he understood why some fathers simply chose to make a payment every month in an effort to minimize dealings with the system. In some ways it may be easier to just send money than to try to fight for rights to see children more.

Ralph discussed a part of the law that allows father's child support payments to decrease if more time per month is spent with the child. According to him, the logic is that if a father is spending more time with the child, then money is being spent in this way and so monthly payments are reduced. This is a part of the law, he continue, that is not spoken about openly because of the nature of the child system and the ultimate of collecting more money in order for the agency to collect money.

Aaron described his experience in the office as feeling like a customer, rather than a father.

“You walk into the office and you fill out a ‘customer service’ form. And my first thought is ‘I’m not a customer and this isn’t a commercial business...at least it shouldn’t be.’ So you fill out the form you get called to the window and on this particular day, I had to go to the back office to discuss my case. There is a chart on the wall that has a picture of a thermometer that’s shaded in and at the top it says ‘show me the money.’ So they’re keeping track of all the employees and how much money they bring in. To that’s something that you have at a sales company not a child support office. That made me feel like when they looked at me, they didn’t see a father, they saw a check.”

Walter and Derrick felt that while the system was unfair, it was necessary because there are fathers who are irresponsible and it keeps those fathers accountable. The fact that they had to become apart of it was the price they paid for having a child they did not live with. Although they wished the circumstances were not as they were, they understood the purpose of it. Derrick specifically felt that his involvement with the system was the price he paid for conceiving a child out of wedlock and described how being in the system, although he struggles financially, has helped to alleviate some of the problems he experienced with his child’s mother.

Another component of the macrosystem is the media. The participants were asked what they thought about the images of Black fathers in the media. For the purposes of this study, the term media was broadly used to mean television and film. The participants all remarked that the images of Black fathers that showed them positively and involved with their children were limited. Some of the participants recalled fathers such as James Evans from *Good Times*, and Cliff Huxtable from *The Cosby Show*. A more recent example that is one of the few positive

examples was that of Monty James, the father in Tyler Perry's *Daddy's Little Girls*. Ralph remarked that like the movie, a father has to be able to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that a mother is unfit, almost villain like in order to get time with their children and respect from the courts.

The consensus between all the participants was that although fathers were shown to be absent or negligent, it did not affect how they thought about themselves as fathers. However, according to Julion et.al, the media does have an effect on how the court systems think about Black fathers (2007). All of the participants did agree with this idea in feeling that the negative images did in fact inform how the courts thought about them and as a result, they felt their treatment by court and child support administration was unjust. Allen's desire was for the media to take an active role in countering the negativity that surrounded Black fatherhood by putting out images that reflected the other side of Black fatherhood, the side that showed fathers actively involved with their children and those who were defying odds to be present. One of the reasons that Jason was able to deflect the negative images was because of what he saw on a daily basis, which were fathers actively engaged with their children. Additionally, Tyson described a father support group he was apart of that celebrated functions, cooked, traveled and coached together.

"I've seen and I know strong Black fathers."

It was because of conscious self-work and self-affirmation that these fathers were able to reject the stereotypical images they saw in television and films. Additionally, it was difficult for this particular group of fathers to invest in the stereotypes because of real images that they saw of Black fathers, their own experiences, and the effort that they put into their own fatherhood. In this way, these individually constructed ideals about fatherhood served them well in combating the prevailing images.

When these fathers were asked about the role they felt their race played in their understanding and meaning of fatherhood, the answers varied. Allen, Ralph, Tyson, Aaron, Jason, Andre and Maurice all felt that race was a major factor in their fatherhood. Many described how they felt they often had to “over prove” themselves to show others that they were good and active fathers. Ralph termed it “above and beyond fatherhood.” These fathers also felt that it was their race that impacted their negative treatment from the court system and the child support system. Michael described a day out with his children in which people walking by would comment on how he must be a good father.

“I don’t know, I may be wrong, but I don’t feel like if I was white that people would make it a point to stop and tell me I’m a good father. It would be normal if they saw a white father with his children, but because I’m Black, you gotta stop and tell me something about what you seeing. It pisses me off honestly; I’m doing what I’m supposed to do. It’s almost as if somebody would stop me and compliment me on walking. I can’t stand it.”

The rest of the participants, Kyle, Derrick, Walter, Blake and Matthew did not feel that race played a part in their definition of fatherhood nor did it affect how they were treated by the court system and child support system. Walter expounded by saying that any father who is not doing what he is supposed to be doing is subject to being treated the same way as a Black father. He also said that he believes that race can sometimes be used as an excuse.

5.1.5 The Chronosystem

The chronosystem might most readily impact the participants in this study by the ways in which child support policy is based upon traditional ideas about fatherhood. When the ideal

image of a white father is pictured, that father is always seen as a financial provider first, then he provides an inheritance for his children. This was primarily because a white mother rarely held employment outside of the home and so the father bore the financial responsibility of his home. Child support as a welfare service was developed in the absence of fathers to essentially provide the income that a father would (Kahn & Kamerman, 1988). As such, money becomes the most important factor when families have to deal with the court system and the child support system. Major changes have occurred in the last 40 years with one major one being that of women holding jobs outside of the home. All of this refers to the ideal dominant images of families.

Participants lamented about how the court and child support do not take into account the other ways in which they parent and support their children, only focusing on the financial aspect. Ralph cited time as being more valuable than money when it came to his children.

5.1.6 Progressive Black Masculinities and Black Feminist Thought

While the ecological systems theory was helpful in defining Black fatherhood, other Africana theories showed up in answers from participants. Those theories were progressive Black masculinities, Black feminist thought. Athena Mutua defines the purpose of progressive Black masculinities to “personally eschew and actively stand against social structures of domination...” and to “value, validate, and empower Black humanity in all its variety as part of the diverse and multicultural humanity of others in the global family” (Mutua, 2006). Mark Anthony Neal references the idea that “men’s identities as fathers do not exist in isolation from their identities as men.” If a part of embracing a progressive black masculinity entails valuing, validating and empowering Black humanity in all its variety, embracing Black fatherhood goes hand in hand.

Some of the responses from the participants of this study embody what Neal refers to as a Black feminist fatherhood (Neal, 2005). Some of the activities he describes that represent a progressive Black masculinity include allowing Black children to see their fathers washing dishes, doing laundry and becoming involved in school activities. Seeing these activities give children a more broad and positive picture of what a Black man can be (Neal, 2005). These activities actively value, validate and empower Black fatherhood in a way that celebrates all the different ways that fathers can be involved with their children that traditional social structures do not embrace. The examples given by the participants in this study where they are helping with homework, doing housework, being involved in their school lives and aiding in formation function all illustrate progressive Black masculinity. The existence in larger society that discourages men from being so involved with their children did not impact these father's feelings and they readily embraced the notion of co-nurturing that Neal discusses as opposed to simply being babysitters to their children every now and then (Neal, 2005). Experiencing nurturing and caring from fathers according to Neal has the power to change the cultural construction of masculinity into something that is less coercive and oppressive for both men and women (Neal, 2005). If and when this idea is embraced, it will limit the number of experiences that were familiar to Michael where people felt the need to give him accolades for being involved with his children. The activities of these fathers are contributing to the gradual shift in ideologies about Black fatherhood and fatherhood in general.

Black feminist thought could be applied to this study by looking at Patricia Hill Collins' controlling images. Controlling images are the gender-specific depictions of people of African descent within Western scholarship and popular culture (Collins, 2008). The controlling images that existed in film and television that seek to define what Black fatherhood is and what it looks

like. However, the participants in this study were able to again eschew those images and define fatherhood on their own terms despite the media and society.

5.2 IMPLICATIONS

This study has several implications on Black fatherhood and for research on fathers and the child support enforcement system. This study has shown that there are many nuances to what it means to be a Black father who is non-residential. Certainly there is not one monolithic way of being a Black father, but there are many similarities in the daily lives of these fathers. This study revealed that in general there were issues of communication with mothers of their children as well as with them the court system and the child support system. Having to deal with the child support system made the process of fathering mostly difficult for the participants as all of them cited an instance where things did not work in their favor or best interests. The stress of having to deal with the system incited different responses depending on the participant. Some of the participants were worn out by the system and had exhausted outside counsel in the form of attorneys to no avail. One father did have some luck with the hiring of an attorney and still others were hopeful that their situations could change once they were able to afford an attorney. The remaining had not entertained getting an attorney for financial reasons. There appeared to be no certain way to obtain the optimal desires of the fathers when it came to dealing with the court and child support.

All of the fathers saw their roles as pivotal to their children's well-being. Although their own situations prevented them from doing so, they all cited daily interaction as a crucial part of parenting. Their lack of time however did not make them feel like they were lacking as fathers. They all generally believed that they were good fathers and employed tenants of what I am

calling African centered fathering by being caregivers, being disciplinarians, providing emotional support and aiding in formation function.

Race had several implications on these fathers' parenting and how they interacted with the child support system. Even though not all of them cited race as a factor, the belief that media images about Black fathers having a negative impact on how others view Black fathers indicates that race does in fact play a large role in the perceptions of Black fathers. Additionally, the role that their own father played in their upbringing and later their parenting implicates the historic roles Black fathers have had in Black family dynamics. However their own fathers were to and for them impacts heavily how they approach parenting sometimes unconsciously as a couple fathers noted that they had never been conscious about it but that it did play a part.

Finally, research on Black fathers' specific experiences is still lacking. The perspectives that research on child support policy typically do not come from the voices of fathers. During the research many fathers expressed gratitude for me taking the time to hear their sides of their stories as they noted they often feel overlooked.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study utilized a qualitative research design with a narrative approach. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for further research:

1. Include the perspectives of administration from the child support enforcement agency.
2. Take an in depth look at both the family court and the child support enforcement agency.
3. Use fathers who actually have an estranged relationship with their children
4. Include new theories and use perspectives from non-residential fathers to inform new

policies that are more relevant to current family structures and dynamics.

Include the perspectives of administration from the child support enforcement agency.

Everything that is discussed in this study about the child support enforcement system and the court system is all based on the experiences of the fathers. There is no first hand information from the child support office that outlines processes and procedures. This perspective may be helpful in defining what this process is like for these fathers. It would be helpful to include this perspective in order to eliminate any bias on the part of the fathers.

Take an in depth look at both the family court and the child support enforcement agency and include the perspectives of the administration

Throughout the interviews, the fathers discussed not only their experiences with child support, but also their experiences with the family court system that sets up the child support payments. These are two separate entities that have two separate functions and it may be helpful to address the roles that they both play, the similarities and differences in dealing with fathers.

Use fathers who might have an estranged relationship with their children

The fathers that were interviewed for this study were fathers who were involved to an extent with the rearing of their children and wanted more time with them. Because there are fathers who are not as involved as these fathers were, it might be helpful to examine fatherhood from those fathers who are not as involved. Perhaps there is a missing perspective that could further explain the actual absence that persists within the Black community and bring clarity to the high statistic that is prevalent within research. Taking this approach could explore fatherhood from the perspective of those fathers who “gave up” as mentioned by Kyle in this study.

Include new theories and use perspectives from non-residential fathers to inform new policies that are more relevant to current family structures and dynamics.

Because much has been researched and written about the Black family and research is developing about Black fathers who do not live with their children, it is imperative that policies that inform family court and child support agencies represent new data and understandings. As it stands, the current system does not acknowledge the totality of fatherhood. Policies that modify the outlook on what a father's role is can be helpful to not only fathers but also serve to cultivate new understandings about the roles that these entities play in Black families. By changing validating the totality of fatherhood through policies and procedures, the systems might seek to encourage more healthy "non-traditional" families.

5.4 CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and analysis of the data, three conclusions were drawn from the study, which assists in answering the study's research questions.

The meaning of Black fatherhood is made up of many components. Those key elements include that of emotional support, self-esteem and self-worth building, discipline, helping with schoolwork, aiding in formation function. Overall their role is to help develop their children into their best selves through co-nurturing. The fathers in this study had influences from family members that included their mothers and other extended members such as uncles and stepfathers. The primary source for their definitions however came from their own fathers no matter what the relationship or frequency of time spent with their fathers was when they were growing up. These primary sources either provided a specific prototype to model after or the absence of a father

provided the opportunity to construct an image based on what might have been missing from a father's own upbringing.

In general, race played a role in the ideas and perceptions of Black fatherhood. Being a Black father had different implications for how people perceived the roles and activities of Black fathers. Typically, Black fathers were perceived as uninvolved and negligent. Furthermore, they were imaged as lazy, dangerous, biologically unfit to care for a child, deadbeat, indifferent, uncaring and buffoonish (Neal, 2005). The fathers in this study were the opposite of this perception and embodied the tenets of progressive black masculinity and black feminist fatherhood. Additionally, the fathers were not discouraged by the disparaging images that exist in society and are more invested in proving to and defining for themselves what Black fatherhood means.

Finally dealing with the policies of the child support enforcement system and communication with their children's mothers were indicated as the most difficult aspects of fatherhood, but they were not necessarily barriers to their parenting. While these interactions made the process of parenting more difficult, it served as motivation often times for fathers rather than discouragement. These fathers were truly invested in parenting their children through rough circumstances and in general had a "by any means necessary" approach to parenting.

The concept of fatherhood is changing for fathers of all races. What it means to be a father now means that fathers are taking on more household roles and participating in nurturing processes that were historically reserved for mothers. Although Staples and Balogun have asserted that Black fathers have always been flexible in their roles and have always embraced the shared roles of parenting and nurturing, the larger society has rarely acknowledged those roles. More and more people's ideas and perceptions around what it means to be a father are shifting

and this shift has major implications for the policies that affect fathers and families. As the reality of dominant fatherhood and Black fatherhood shifts, it is crucial that social structures follow suit to ensure that these structures are acting in the best interests of those involved in the systems.

Research on fathers has been limited in the past, however more research is emerging engaging fathers and attempting to define what contemporary fatherhood means. Research in this particular context, that of non-residential fathers, is still sparse but looks promising as well with new studies being published that indicate the high involvement of Black fathers. This study sought to give voice to a population that is rarely heard in an attempt to give them a chance to name themselves as fathers and define for themselves what that meant. From the participants I gathered that these were men who read to their children, completed homework, combed hair, cooked meals, nurtured them when they were sick and exposed them new ideas. Additionally, these fathers were present emotionally, they helped their children to make good decisions, helped to shape their self-esteem and character, encouraged and challenged them to become the best people they could become. When necessary, they were disciplinarians and made sure that the discipline matched the crime and that there was a lesson that was learned from a consequence of an action. These are the things that go unnoticed when conversations abound about fathers. Even in their limited time with their children, these fathers were finding ways in still impart fatherly wisdom. It was their hope that their children appreciated what they were able to do for them. Overall, I gathered that even though navigating the child support system is difficult and it could be said that the operations are unjust towards Black fathers, these fathers did not let that stop them from doing what they had to do in order to still call themselves good fathers. These fathers defy the stereotypes and showcase the other side of fatherhood that often goes unnoticed.

In conclusion, throughout African American Studies, the idea of naming comes up quite frequently. The importance of naming oneself for self-validation based on one's particular experiences becomes important in a world that seeks to tear down or belittle marginalized groups. As Black fathers often sit at the margins, this study gave fathers a chance to discuss their context and what it meant for them to be Black fathers. They were able to validate themselves and as a result, they reported that the negative media images and perceptions of Black fathers did not negatively affect them. In the changing world of fatherhood, it is important that all stories of parenting become validated in order to tell a more rich story about the experiences of all those with a responsibility to parent. It is even more important that these stories begin to influence policies that affect these families in order to create more rich family dynamics and create policies that encourage fathers to be involved. Validating additional ways that fathers parent and engage with their children may have implications on fathers and their relationships with mothers and children in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Informed Consent

Georgia State University
Department of African-American Studies
Informed Consent

TITLE: Fatherhood Through their Eyes: The Meaning of Fatherhood for Non-Residential Black Fathers

Principal Investigator:	Dr. Makungu M. Akinyela
Student Investigator:	Amberly K. Thompson

STUDY LEADERSHIP: My name is Amberly Thompson. I am a student in the Department of African American Studies at Georgia State University. I am asking you to participate in this research. Professor Makungu Akinyela, a member of the department, is supervising the study.

PURPOSE: I am doing this study to look at your experiences as a father who does not live with his children and pays child support to the child support enforcement system of Georgia.

ELIGIBILITY: To be in this study, you need to be 21 years or older, live in the Atlanta area, live away from your child(ren) and be registered in the child support enforcement system of Georgia.

PROCEDURES: If you agree to participate, you will be apart of a one-on-one interview to talk about your experiences with being a father and being in the child support enforcement system. The interview will take place with the student researcher, Amberly Thompson, at a public location that is close to you. We will meet at a mutually agreed upon time and the interview will last about 30 minutes. There is no compensation for your time.

PARTICIPATION: Before the study, you will fill out a demographic form that will let me know your age, how much school you completed, how many children you have, what your job is and how much money you make.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION: The risks you run by taking part in this study are minimal, and not higher than those faced in everyday life. The risk includes the possibility that you may be offended by some of the questions in the survey. You are free to skip any question that makes you comfortable or stop the survey at any time and your response will not be used.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION: This study will not benefit you personally. This study will benefit me by helping me to finish my thesis research. This study is also intended to benefit the study of African American Studies by helping to understand and explain the often complicated experiences of Black fathers.

COMPENSATION: There is no compensation for being in this study.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop or withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any particular question for any reason without it being held against you. Changing your mind to be in this study is okay; you will not be penalized for choosing not to participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY: No identifying information about you is being collected. You will be given an ID number to classify your responses from other participant responses. Your name will be changed to a random name in the write up of the study. No one will be able to identify who you are.

FURTHER INFORMATION: If you have any questions or would like more information about the study, please contact Amberly Thompson at Athompson60@student.gsu.edu or 404-909-3216. You may also contact my advisor at makinyela@gsu.edu or 404-413-5141. You will receive a copy of this consent form. You may also call Susan Vogtner at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team.

CONSENT: By signing below, you understand the information on this form, and agree that any questions you may have about this study have been answered and that you are eligible and voluntarily agree to participate. If you agree to participate in this study, please sign below.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

In this interview I will ask you questions regarding your relationships in your life dealing with your child(ren) and also about your dealings with the child support enforcement system. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in these aspects of your life to gain insight about your experiences as a non-custodial father who does not have custody of your child(ren).

What does it mean to be a father?

1. In your own words, what does it mean to be a father?
2. Where did you get that definition?
3. What are your strengths as a father? What are your challenges?
4. Can you describe for me a typical day that you spend with your child?
5. Do you think you are a good father?

What are some sources for your definition of being a father?

1. What is your relationship like with your child(ren)'s mother(s)?
2. Can you tell me about your relationship with your parents?
3. What do you think about images of black fathers you may see on television or in films?
4. Do you think that influences the way you think about yourself or other black fathers?

What are your experiences with the Child Support Enforcement System of GA?

1. Can you describe a typical experience with child support?
2. What are some non-financial ways you support your child? Can you think of other forms of support that you would like to do with your child? (Other ways of involvement)
3. Describe for me an experience that you can recall when dealing with the office?
4. How were you treated during this particular experience?
5. What was your experience with the customer service?
6. Have you experienced any consequences of the enforcement system?
7. Are you always able to pay your child support comfortably every month?

What role do you think race plays in your fatherhood?

1. Are there any ways that your race or culture affects your definition of fatherhood?
2. What does it mean to be a Black father?
3. Do you think others might perceive you in a certain way because you are a Black father?

Appendix C: Demographic Sheet

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Instructions: The purpose of the following is to gather basic demographic information about you. For each category, please indicate the option that most closely represents you. Please select only one response per subject area.

Age:

Please write your age.

Number of Children:

Please write the number of children you have.

Level of Education:

Please circle what level of education you have completed.

Some High School

High School Graduate

Some College

Currently Enrolled? Yes No

College Graduate

Advanced Degree

Occupation

Please write what is your current occupation and length of employment.

Annual Household Income:

Please circle your current household income

(If enrolled in college and dependent on parents, indicate their annual household income.)

Less than \$10,000	\$35,000 to \$49,999
\$10,000 to \$14,999	\$50,000 to \$74,999
\$15,000 to \$24,999	\$75,000 to \$99,999
\$25,000 to \$34,999	\$100,000 or more

Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer

Are you a Black father who does not
reside with your child(ren)?
If so, your help may be needed!

A Master's degree candidate in the Department of African American Studies at Georgia State University is doing a study on the experiences of black fathers who do not live with their children, but are registered in the child support system. If you are interested or have any questions, please contact (404) 909-3216 or Athompson60@student.gsu.

